

GEORGES PEREC

*Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATED
BY JOHN STURROCK*'One of the most significant literary personalities in the world'*
— Italo Calvino

Georges Perec, author of the highly acclaimed *Life: A User's Manual*, was only forty-six when he died in 1982. Despite a tragic childhood, during which his mother was deported to Auschwitz, Perec produced some of the most entertaining essays of the age. His literary output was deliberately varied in form and style and this generous selection of Perec's non-fictional work, the first to appear in English, demonstrates his characteristic lightness of touch, wry humour and accessibility.

As he contemplates the many ways in which we occupy the space around us, as he depicts the commonplace items with which we are familiar in a startling, engrossing way, as he recounts his psychoanalysis while remaining reticent about his feelings or depicts the Paris of his childhood without a trace of sentimentality, we become aware that we are in the presence of a remarkable, virtuoso writer.

Cover photograph of Georges Perec © Maurice Henry/L'Express

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GEORGES PEREC

Species of Spaces and Other Pieces

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For Pierre Getzler

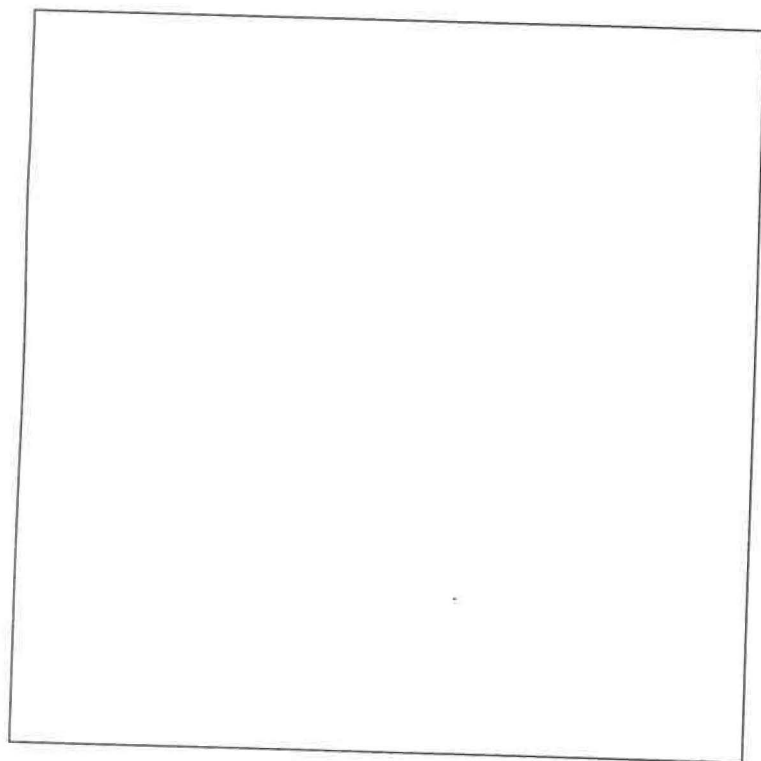


Figure 1: Map of the Ocean
(taken from Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*)

SPACE
 OPEN SPACE
 ENCLOSED SPACE
 OUTER SPACE
 SPACE SUIT
 SPACE AGE
 LIVING SPACE
 PROJECTIVE SPACE
 SPACE CAPSULE
 LACK OF SPACE
 SPACE BAND
 SPACE HEATER
 DEEP SPACE
 SPACE ODYSSEY
 SPACE SALESMAN
 EUCLIDEAN SPACE
 SPACE CADET
 SPACE STATION
 BLANK SPACE
 SPACE OUT
 PARKING SPACE
 SPACE INVADERS
 SPACE WALK
 SPACE TIME CONTINUUM
 SPACE BAR
 LOST IN SPACE
 STARING INTO SPACE
 WATCH THIS SPACE
 SPACE CURVE
 SPACE LATTICE
 SPACE OPERA
 CATCHER SPACE
 SPACE SICKNESS
 BUNCHER SPACE
 THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACE
 HAIR SPACE
 SPACE RACE
 NULL SPACE

LEAVE A SPACE
 SPACE OF A MOMENT
 INTERCOSTAL SPACE
 AVAILABLE SPACE
 SPACE NEEDLE
 POSITION IN SPACE
 EDGES OF SPACE
 SPACE WRITER
 WIDE OPEN SPACES
 LACK OF SPACE
 SPACE SAVING
 ENCLOSED SPACE
 SPACE FILLER
 WASTED SPACE

Foreword

The subject of this book is not the void exactly, but rather what there is round about or inside it (cf Fig. 1). To start with, then, there isn't very much: nothingness, the impalpable, the virtually immaterial; extension, the external, what is external to us, what we move about in the midst of, our ambient milieu, the space around us.

Space. Not so much those infinite spaces, whose mutism is so prolonged that it ends by triggering off something akin to fear, nor the already almost domesticated interplanetary, intersidereal or intergalactic spaces, but spaces that are much closer to hand, in principle anyway: towns, for example, or the countryside, or the corridors of the Paris Métro, or a public park.

We live in space, in these spaces, these towns, this countryside, these corridors, these parks. That seems obvious to us. Perhaps indeed it should be obvious. But it isn't obvious, not just a matter of course. It's real, obviously, and as a consequence most likely rational. We can touch. We can even allow ourselves to dream. There's nothing, for example, to stop us from imagining things that are neither towns nor countryside (nor suburbs), or Métro corridors that are at the same time public parks. Nor anything to forbid us imagining a Métro in the heart of the countryside [*campagne*] (I've even before now seen an advertisement to that effect, but it was — how shall I put it? — a publicity campaign [*campagne*]).

What's certain, in any case, is that at a time too remote no doubt for any of us to have retained anything like a precise memory of it, there was none of all this: neither corridors, nor parks, nor towns, nor countryside. The problem isn't so much to find out how we have reached this point, but simply to recognize that we have reached it, that we are here. There isn't one space, a beautiful space, a beautiful space round about, a beautiful space all around

us, there's a whole lot of small bits of space, and one of these bits is a Métro corridor, and another of them is a public park. Another – and here we suddenly enter into much more particularized spaces – originally quite modest in size, has attained fairly colossal dimensions and has become Paris, whereas a space near by, not necessarily any less well endowed to begin with, has been content to remain Pontoise. Still another space, much larger and vaguely hexagonal, has been surrounded by a broad dotted line (innumerable events, some of them particularly weighty, had as their sole purpose the tracing out of this dotted line) and it has been decided that everything found *inside* this dotted line should be coloured violet and be called France, while everything found *outside* this dotted line should be in a different colour (although, outside the aforesaid hexagon, they weren't in the least anxious to be of a uniform colour: one bit of space wanted its colour and another bit its, whence the famous problem in topology of the four colours, unresolved to this day) and have a different name (in point of fact and for quite a few years, there was a strong insistence on colouring violet – and thereby calling France – bits of space that didn't belong to the aforesaid hexagon, but were often far distant from it, but, generally speaking, that didn't last half so well).

In short, spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified. There are spaces today of every kind and every size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself.

or, if you prefer:

ACT ONE

A voice (off):

To the North, nothing.

To the South, nothing.

To the East, nothing.

To the West, nothing.

In the centre, nothing.

The curtain falls. End of Act One.

ACT TWO

A voice (off):

To the North, nothing.

To the South, nothing.

To the East, nothing.

To the West, nothing.

In the centre, a tent.

The curtain falls. End of Act Two.

ACT THREE AND LAST

A voice (off):

To the North, nothing.

To the South, nothing.

To the East, nothing.

To the West, nothing.

In the centre, a tent,

and,

in front of the tent,

an orderly busy polishing a pair

of boots

with 'LION NOIR' boot polish!

The curtain falls. End of Act Three and Last.

(Author unknown. Learnt around 1947, recalled in 1973.)

Or again:

*In Paris, there is a street;
in that street, there is a house;
in that house, there is a staircase;
on that staircase, there is a room;
in that room, there is a table;
on that table, there is a cloth;
on that cloth, there is a cage;
in that cage, there is a nest;
in that nest, there is an egg;
in that egg, there is a bird.*

*The bird knocked the egg over;
the egg knocked the nest over;
the nest knocked the cage over;
the cage knocked the cloth over;
the cloth knocked the table over;
the table knocked the room over;
the room knocked the staircase over;
the staircase knocked the house over;
the house knocked the street over;
the street knocked the town of Paris over.*

Children's song from Les Deux-Sèvres
(Paul Eluard, *Poésie involontaire
et poésie intentionnelle*)

The Page

'I write in order to peruse myself'

Henri Michaux

1

I write . . .

I write: I write . . .

I write: 'I write . . .'

I write that I write . . .

etc.

I write: I trace words on a page.

Letter by letter, a text forms, affirms itself, is confirmed, is frozen,
is fixed:

a fairly strictly h

o
r
i
z
o
n
t
a
l

line is set down on the blank sheet of
paper, blackens the virgin space, gives it a direction, vectorizes it:
from left to right

f
r
o
m

t
o
p

t
o

b
o
t
t
o
m

Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn't much, a few signs, but which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left, a recto and a verso.

2

The space of a sheet of paper (regulation international size, as used in Government departments, on sale at all stationers) measures 623.7 sq. cm. You have to write a little over sixteen pages to take up one square metre. Assuming the average format of a book to be 21 by 29.7 cm, you could, if you were to pull apart all the printed books kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale and spread the pages carefully out one beside the other, cover the whole, either of the island of St Helena or of Lake Trasimeno.

You could also work out the number of hectares of forest that have had to be felled in order to produce the paper needed to print the works of Alexandre Dumas (*père*), who, it will be remembered, had a tower built each stone of which had the title of one of his books engraved on it.

3

I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it.

I incite *blanks*, *spaces* (jumps in the meaning: discontinuities, transitions, changes of key).

I write
in the
margin

I start a new
paragraph. I refer to a footnote¹

I go to a new sheet of paper.

1. I am very fond of footnotes at the bottom of the page, even if I don't have anything in particular to clarify there.

There are few events which don't leave a written trace at least. At one time or another, almost everything passes through a sheet of paper, the page of a notebook, or of a diary, or some other chance support (a Métro ticket, the margin of a newspaper, a cigarette packet, the back of an envelope etc.) on which, at varying speeds and by a different technique depending on the place, time or mood, one or another of the miscellaneous elements that comprise the everydayness of life comes to be inscribed. Where I'm concerned (but I'm no doubt too choice an example, writing being in fact one of my principal activities), this goes from an address caught in passing, an appointment noted down in haste, or the writing-out of a cheque, an envelope or a package, to the laborious drafting of an official letter, the tedious filling-in of a form (tax return, sickness note, direct debit for gas and electricity bills, subscription form, contract, lease, endorsement, receipt etc.), to a list of urgently needed supplies (coffee, sugar, cat litter, Baudrillard book, 75-watt bulb, batteries, underwear etc.), from the sometimes rather tricky solution to a Robert Scipion crossword to the fair copy of a finally completed text, from notes taken at some lecture or other to the instant scribbling-down of some device that may come in useful (verbal play, verbal ploy, play on letters, or what's commonly known as an 'idea'), from a piece of literary 'work' (writing, yes, sitting down at the table and writing, sitting at the typewriter and writing, writing right through the day, or right through the night, roughing out a plan, putting down capital *Is* and small *as*, drawing sketches, putting one word next to another, looking in a dictionary, recopying, rereading, crossing-out, throwing away, rewriting, sorting, rediscovering, waiting for it to come, trying to extract something that might resemble a text from something that continues to look like an insubstantial scrawl, getting there, not getting there, smiling (sometimes), etc.) to work full stop (elementary, alimentary): i.e. to ticking, in a journal containing a summary of almost all the others in the field of the life sciences, the titles that may be of interest to the research-

workers whose bibliographical documentation I am supposed to provide, filling in index-cards, assembling references, correcting proofs, etc.

Et cetera.

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet?

Space as inventory, space as invention. Space begins with that model map in the old editions of the *Petit Larousse Illustré*, which used to represent something like 65 geographical terms in 60 sq. cm., miraculously brought together, deliberately abstract. Here is the desert, with its oasis, its wadi and its salt lake, here are the spring and the stream, the mountain torrent, the canal, the confluence, the river, the estuary, the river-mouth and the delta, here is the sea with its islands, its archipelago, its islets, its reefs, its shoals, its rocks, its offshore bar, and here are the strait, the isthmus and the peninsula, the bight and the narrows, and the gulf and the bay, and the cape and the inlet, and the head, and the promontory, here are the lagoon and the cliff, here are the dunes, here are the beach, and the saltwater lakes, and the marshes, here is the lake, and here are the mountains, the peak, the glacier, the volcano, the spur, the slope, the col, the gorge, here are the plain and the plateau, and the hillside and the hill, here is the town and its anchorage, and its harbour and its lighthouse . . .

Virtual space, a simple pretext for a nomenclature. But you don't even need to close your eyes for the space evoked by these words, a dictionary space only, a paper space, to become alive, to be

populated, to be filled: a long goods train drawn by a steam locomotive passes over a viaduct; barges laden with gravel ply the canals; small sailing boats manoeuvre on the lake; a big liner escorted by tugs enters the anchorage; children play ball on the beach; an Arab wearing a big straw hat trots down the shady paths of the oasis on his donkey . . .

The streets of the town are full of cars. A turbaned housewife is beating a carpet at her window. In small suburban plots, dozens of nurserymen are pruning fruit trees. A detachment of soldiers presents arms as an official wearing a tricolour sash unveils the statue of a general.

There are cows in the pasture, winegrowers in the vineyards, lumberjacks in the forests, climbers roped together in the mountains. A postman on his bicycle pedals laboriously up the hairpin bends of a lane. There are washerwomen beside the river, roadmenders beside the roads, and farmers' wives feeding the hens. Rows of children are coming out in twos into the school yard. A *fin-de-siècle* villa stands all on its own surrounded by tall glass buildings. There are little gingham curtains in the windows, drinkers on the terraces of the cafés, a cat warming itself in the sun, a lady weighed down by parcels hailing a taxi, a sentry mounting guard in front of a public building. There are garbage-collectors filling refuse trucks, decorators putting up scaffolding. There are nannies in the squares, second-hand booksellers along the quays; there's a queue in front of the bakery, one gentleman walking his dog, another reading his newspaper sitting on a bench, another watching workmen demolishing a block of houses. There's a policeman controlling the traffic. There are birds in the trees, sailors on the river, fishermen on the embankment. There's a woman raising the iron shutter of her haberdashery. There are chestnut-vendors, sewer-men, newspaper-sellers. There are people doing their shopping.

Studious readers are reading in the libraries. Teachers are giving their lessons. Students are taking notes. Accountants are lining up

columns of figures. Apprentice pastry cooks are stuffing cream into rows of cream puffs. Pianists are playing their scales. Sitting deep in thought at their tables, writers are forming lines of words.

An idealized scene. Space as reassurance.

The Bed

'For a long time I went to bed in writing'
Parcel Mroust*

1

We generally utilize the page in the larger of its two dimensions. The same goes for the bed. The bed (or, if you prefer, the page) is a rectangular space, longer than it is wide, in which, or on which, we normally lie longways. 'Italian' beds are only to be found in fairy tales (Tom Thumb and his brothers, or the seven daughters of the Ogre, for example) or in altogether abnormal and usually serious circumstances (mass exodus, aftermath of a bombing raid, etc.). Even when we utilize the bed the more usual way round, it's almost always a sign of a catastrophe if several people have to sleep in it. The bed is an instrument conceived for the nocturnal repose of one or two persons, but no more.

The bed is thus the individual space *par excellence*, the elementary space of the body (the bed-monad), the one which even the man completely crippled by debts has the right to keep: the bailiffs don't have the power to seize *your* bed. This also means – this is easily verified in practice – that we have only one bed, which is *our* bed. When there are other beds in a house or an apartment, they are said to be guest beds or spare beds. It seems we only sleep well in our own bed.

*A play on the first sentence of Proust's great novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which reads: 'For a long time I went to bed early.'

2

'Lit = île'*
Michel Leiris

It was lying face-down on my bed that I read *Twenty Years After*, *The Mysterious Island* and *Jerry on the Island*. The bed became a trapper's cabin, or a lifeboat on the raging ocean, or a baobab tree threatened by fire, a tent erected in the desert, or a propitious crevice that my enemies passed within inches of, unavailingly.

I travelled a great deal at the bottom of my bed. For survival, I carried sugar lumps I went and stole from the kitchen and hid under my bolster (they scratched . . .). Fear – terror even – was always present, despite the protection of the blankets and pillow.

Bed: where unformulated dangers threatened, the place of contraries, the space of the solitary body encumbered by its ephemeral harems, the foreclosed space of desire, the improbable place where I had my roots, the space of dreams and of an Oedipal nostalgia:

Happy he who can sleep without fear and without remorse
In the paternal bed, massive, venerable,
Where all his kinsfolk were born and where they died.

José-Maria de Heredia, *Trophées*

3

I like my bed. I've had it for a little over two years. Before that, it belonged to a woman friend of mine who had just moved into an apartment so tiny that her bed, though of perfectly orthodox dimensions, would barely fit in the room intended to receive it,

*Literally 'bed = island', Leiris's point being that the closeness in sound between the two French words has somehow determined the closeness (for him) in their meaning.

so she swapped it for the one I then had, which was slightly narrower.

(One day I shall write – see the next chapter – the history of, among others things, my beds.)

I like my bed. I like to stretch out on my bed and to gaze at the ceiling with a tranquil eye. I would gladly devote the major part of my time to this (the mornings mainly) were I not so often prevented by supposedly more urgent occupations (to list them would be tedious). I like ceilings, I like mouldings and ceiling roses. They often serve me instead of a Muse and the intricate embellishments in the plasterwork put me readily in mind of those other labyrinths, woven from phantasms, ideas and words. But people no longer pay any attention to ceilings. They are made dispiritingly rectilinear or, worse still, done up with so-called exposed beams.

A huge plank has long served me as a bedhead. With the exception of solid foodstuffs (I'm not usually hungry when I stay in bed), everything I couldn't do without was to be found assembled there, in the areas of both the necessary and the pointless: a bottle of mineral water, a glass, a pair of nail-scissors (chipped unfortunately), a collection of crosswords by Robert Scipion (I take the opportunity to address a tiny reproach to him: in the 43rd grid of the said collection, excellent otherwise, he has – implicitly – got *néanmoins* with two *ms*, which, obviously, means that the corresponding word across is wrong [it couldn't decently be written as *assomnoir*] and that the solution to the puzzle has been palpably compromised), a packet of paper handkerchiefs, a hard brush that enabled me to give my (female as it happens) cat's fur a sheen that was the admiration of all, a telephone, thanks to which I was able, not only to give my friends reports on my state of health, but to inform numerous callers that I was not the Michelin Company, a fully transistorized radio playing all day long, should the mood take me, various kinds of music interspersed with whispered news items about traffic jams, a few dozen books (some that I had intended to read and didn't read, others that I re-read

constantly), albums of strip cartoons, piles of newspapers, a complete smoker's kit, various diaries, notebooks, exercise-books and loose sheets of paper, an alarm-clock, naturally, a tube of Alka-Seltzer (empty), another of aspirins (half full or, if you prefer, half empty), yet another of cequinyl (an anti-flu treatment, more or less untouched), a torch, of course, numerous handouts I had neglected to throw away, letters, felt-pens, ballpoints (both these last often dry), pencils, a pencil-sharpener, an eraser (these three last articles intended for the solving of the aforesaid crosswords), a pebble picked up on the beach at Dieppe, a few other small mementoes and a post office calendar.

4

A few other banalities:

We spend more than a third of our lives in a bed.

The bed is one of the rare places where we adopt roughly speaking a horizontal posture. The others are much more specialized: operating table, bench in a sauna, chaise-longue, beach, psychoanalyst's couch . . .

Techniques of sleeping: the idea that lying down is something natural is quite inaccurate (see Marcel Mauss, 'Techniques of the Body', in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, p. 378; the whole paragraph – too succinct, alas! – would be worth quoting).

And what about hammocks? And paliasses? And bedsteads? And box-beds? And divans deep as the grave? And straw pallets? And railway couchettes? And camp beds? And sleeping-bags resting on air-beds themselves resting on a carpet of earth?

The Bedroom

1

Fragments from a Work in Progress

I have an exceptional, I believe fairly prodigious even, memory of all the places I have slept in, with the exception of those from my earliest childhood – up until the end of the war – which have all merged in the undifferentiated greyness of a school dormitory. For the others, all I need to do, once I'm in bed, is to close my eyes and to think with a minimum of application of a given place for the bedroom to come instantly back into my memory in every detail – the position of the doors and windows, the arrangement of the furniture – for me to feel, more precisely still, the almost physical sensation of being once again in bed in that room.

Thus:

ROCK (Cornwall) Summer 1954

When you open the door, the bed is almost immediately on the left. It's a very narrow bed, and the room, too, is very narrow (give or take a few centimetres, the width of the bed plus the width of the door, i.e. hardly more than one metre fifty), and not much longer than it is wide. In extension of the bed, there is a small hanging cupboard. At the far end, a sash window. To the right, a washstand with a marble top, with a basin and a water jug, which I don't think I used much.

I'm almost certain there was a framed print on the left-hand wall, facing the bed; not just any old coloured print, but a Renoir perhaps or a Sisley.

There was lino on the floor. There was no table, or any armchair,

but a chair without arms perhaps, against the left-hand wall: I used to throw my clothes on to it before getting into bed. I don't think I sat on it; I only came into this room to sleep. It was on the third and last floor of the house, I had to be careful going upstairs when I came in late not to wake up my landlady and her family.

I was on holiday, I had just passed my *bac*. In theory, I should have been living at a boarding-house that took in French school-children whose parents wanted them to improve their use of English. But the boarding-house was full and I had been billeted on a family.

Each morning, my landlady would open my door and put down a steaming cup of 'morning tea' at the foot of my bed, which I invariably drank cold. I always got up too late, and only once or twice did I manage to arrive in time to eat the copious breakfast that was served in the boarding-house.

It will no doubt be remembered that during that summer, following the Geneva Agreements and the negotiations with Tunisia and Morocco, the entire planet experienced peace for the first time in several decades: a situation that lasted for only a few days and which I don't think has recurred since.

My memories are attached to the narrowness of that bed, to the narrowness of that room, to the lingering bitterness of the tea that was too strong and too cold. That summer, I drank 'pink gins', or glasses of gin improved by a drop of angostura, I flirted, somewhat fruitlessly, with the daughter of a cotton-mill-owner who had recently returned from Alexandria, I decided to become a writer, I slaved away at playing, on country harmoniums, the one tune I've ever succeeded in learning: the 54 opening notes – for the right hand, the left hand most often failing to follow – of a Bach prelude.

The resurrected space of the bedroom is enough to bring back to life, to recall, to revive memories, the most fleeting and anodyne along with the most essential. The coenesthetic certainty of my

body in the bed, the topographical certainty of the bed in the room, these alone reactivate my memory, and give it an acuity and a precision it hardly ever has otherwise. Just as a word brought back from a dream can, almost before it is written down, restore a whole memory of that dream, here, the mere fact of knowing (almost without having needed to search for it, simply by having stretched out for a few moments and having closed my eyes) that the wall was on my right, the door beside me on the left (by raising my arm I could touch the handle), the window facing me, instantly evokes in me a chaotic flood of details so vivid as to leave me speechless: the young girl with the doll-like manner, the immensely long Englishman whose nose was slightly crooked (I saw him again in London, when I went to spend three days there at the end of this pseudo-linguistic holiday; he took me into a pub smothered in greenery that, sadly, I've never managed to find again since, and to a promenade concert at the Albert Hall, where I was very proud to hear, conducted it may well be by Sir John Barbirolli, a concerto for mouth organ and orchestra written especially for Larry Adler), marshmallows, Rock rock (decorated barley sugar, a speciality of seaside resorts; the best known is Brighton rock, which is – apart from being a play on words: there are rocks in Brighton just as there are cliffs in Etretat – the title of a novel by Graham Greene; even at Rock it was hard to escape it), the grey beach, the cold sea, and the wooded countryside, with its old stone bridges, where you might have expected sprites and will o' the wisps to appear at any moment.

It's no doubt because the space of the bedroom works for me like a Proustian madeleine (the whole project is of course invoked by this; all it is is nothing more than a rigorous extension of paragraphs 6 and 7 of the first chapter of the first part [*Combray*] of the first volume [*Du côté de chez Swann*] of *A la recherche du temps perdu*) that I undertook, several years ago now, to make an inventory, as exhaustive and as accurate as possible, of all the 'Places Where I Have Slept'. As yet, I've scarcely begun to describe them; on the other hand, I believe I've just about listed them all. There are about two hundred of them (barely half a dozen get added every

year; I have become something of a home body). I haven't yet finally settled on the manner in which I shall classify them. Certainly not in chronological order. Doubtless not in alphabetical order (although it's the only order whose pertinence requires no justification). Maybe according to their geographical arrangement, which would emphasize the 'guidebook' aspect of the work. Or else, according rather to a thematic perspective which might result in a sort of typology of bedrooms:

1. *My* bedrooms
2. Dormitories and barrack-rooms
3. Friends' bedrooms
4. Guest rooms
5. Makeshift beds (settee, moquette plus cushions, carpet, chaise-longue, etc.)
6. Houses in the country
7. Rented villas
8. Hotel rooms
 - a. scruffy hotels, boarding houses
 - b. luxury hotels
9. Unusual conditions: nights on a train, on a plane, in a car; nights on a boat; nights on guard duty; nights in a police station; nights under canvas; nights in hospital; sleepless nights, etc.

I spent several months or years in a small number of these rooms; in most, I spent only a few days or a few hours. It's foolhardy perhaps on my part to claim I shall be able to remember every one of them: what was the pattern of the wallpaper in that room in the Hôtel du Lion d'Or in Saint-Chély-d'Apcher (the name – much more surprising when spoken than when written – of that cantonal capital in the Lozère has been anchored for some unknown reason in my memory since I was in the third form and had been very insistent we should stop there)? But it's from the resurrected memories of these ephemeral bedrooms that I expect the greatest revelations obviously.

2

Minor problem

When, in a given bedroom, you change the position of the bed, can you say you are changing rooms, or else what?

(cf. topological analysis.)

3

What does it mean, to live in a room? Is to live in a place to take possession of it? What does taking possession of a place mean? As from when does somewhere become truly yours? Is it when you've put your three pairs of socks to soak in a pink plastic bowl? Is it when you've heated up your spaghetti over a camping-gaz? Is it when you've used up all the non-matching hangers in the cupboard? Is it when you've drawing-pinned to the wall an old postcard showing Carpaccio's 'Dream of St Ursula'? Is it when you've experienced there the throes of anticipation, or the exaltations of passion, or the torments of a toothache? Is it when you've hung suitable curtains up on the windows, and put up the wallpaper, and sanded the parquet flooring?

4

Placid small thought no 1

Any cat-owner will rightly tell you that cats inhabit houses much better than people do. Even in the most dreadfully square spaces, they know how to find favourable corners.

Placid small thought no 2

The passage of time (my History) leaves behind a residue that accumulates: photographs, drawings, the corpses of long since

dried-up felt-pens, shirts, non-returnable glasses and returnable glasses, cigar wrappers, tins, erasers, postcards, books, dust and knickknacks: this is what I call my fortune.

The Apartment

1

For two years, I had a very old neighbour. She had lived in the building for seventy years, had been a widow for sixty. In the last years of her life, after she had broken the neck of her femur, she never went further than the landing on her own floor. The concierge, or a young boy from the building, ran her errands. Several times she stopped me on the stairs to ask me what day it was. One day I went to get her a slice of ham. She offered me an apple and invited me in. She lived surrounded by exceedingly gloomy furniture that she spent her time rubbing.

2

A few years ago, one of my friends had the idea of living for a whole month in an international airport, without ever leaving it (unless, all international airports being by definition identical, to catch a plane that would have taken him to another international airport). To my knowledge, he has never realized this project, but it's hard to see what, objectively, there might be to prevent him. The activities essential to life, and most social activities, can be carried out without difficulty within the confines of an international airport: there are deep armchairs and bench seats that aren't too uncomfortable, and often restrooms even, in which passengers in transit can take a nap. You've got toilets, baths and showers, and often saunas and Turkish baths. You've got hairdressers, pedicurists, nurses, masseurs and physiotherapists, bootblacks, dry cleaners who are equally happy to mend heels and make duplicate keys, watchmakers and opticians. You've got restaurants, bars and cafeterias, leather shops and perfumeries,

florists, bookshops, record shops, tobacconists and sweet shops, shops selling pens and photographers. You've got food shops, cinemas, a post office, flying secretarial services and, naturally, a whole host of banks (since it's practically impossible, in this day and age, to live without having dealings with a bank).

The interest of such an undertaking would lie above all in its exoticism: a displacement, more apparent than real, of our habits and rhythms, and minor problems of adaptation. It would quite soon become tedious no doubt. All told, it would be too easy and, as a consequence, not very testing. Seen in this light, an airport is no more than a sort of shopping mall, a simulated urban neighbourhood. Give or take a few things, it offers the same benefits as a hotel. So we could hardly draw any practical conclusion from such an undertaking, by way of either subversion or acclimatization. At most, we might use it as the subject-matter for a piece of reportage, or as the point of departure for an umpteenth comic screenplay.

3

A bedroom is a room in which there is a bed; a dining-room is a room in which there are a table and chairs, and often a sideboard; a sitting-room is a room in which there are armchairs and a couch; a kitchen is a room in which there is a cooker and a water inlet; a bathroom is a room in which there is a water inlet above a bathtub; when there is only a shower, it is known as a shower-room; when there is only a wash-basin it is known as a cloakroom; an entrance-hall is a room in which at least one of the doors leads outside the apartment; in addition, you may find a coat-rack in there; a child's bedroom is a room into which you put a child; a broom closet is a room into which you put brooms and the vacuum cleaner; a maid's bedroom is a room that you let to a student.

From this list, which might easily be extended, two elementary conclusions may be drawn that I offer by way of definitions:

1. Every apartment consists of a variable, but finite, number of rooms.
2. Each room has a particular function.

It would seem difficult, or rather it would seem derisory, to question these self-evident facts. 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, and it is no good their trying to impress us with stuff about modules and other nonsense: they're never anything more than a sort of cube, or let's say 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 (very rarely more, but if I start in on the niggardliness of building contractors, I shall never stop). In sum, a room is a fairly malleable space.

I don't know, and don't want to know, where functionality begins or ends. It seems to me, in any case, that in the ideal dividing-up of today's apartments functionality functions in accordance with a procedure that is unequivocal, sequential and nycthemeral.¹ The activities of the day correspond to slices of time, and to each slice of time there corresponds one room of the apartment. The following model is hardly a caricature:

07.00	The mother gets up and goes to get breakfast in the	KITCHEN
07.15	The child gets up and goes into the	BATHROOM
07.30	The father gets up and goes into the	BATHROOM
07.45	The father and the child have their breakfast in the	KITCHEN
08.00	The child takes his coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL

1. This is the best phrase in the whole book!

	and goes off to school	
08.15	The father takes his coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL
	and goes off to his office	
08.30	The mother performs her toilet in the	BATHROOM
08.45	The mother takes the vacuum cleaner from the and does the housework (she then goes through all the rooms of the apartment but I forbear from listing them)	BROOM CLOSET
09.30	The mother fetches her shopping basket from the and her coat from the and goes to do the shopping	KITCHEN ENTRANCE-HALL
10.30	The mother returns from shopping and puts her coat back in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
10.45	The mother prepares lunch in the	KITCHEN
12.15	The father returns from the office and hangs his coat up in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
12.30	The father and the mother have lunch in the (the child is a day boarder)	DINING-ROOM
13.15	The father takes his coat from the and leaves again for his office	ENTRANCE-HALL
13.30	The mother does the dishes in the	KITCHEN
14.00	The mother takes her coat from the and goes out for a walk or	ENTRANCE-HALL

	to run some errands before going to fetch the child from school	
16.15	The mother and the child return and put their coats back in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
16.30	The child has his tea in the	KITCHEN
16.45	The child goes to do his homework in the	CHILD'S ROOM
18.30	The mother gets supper ready in the	KITCHEN
18.45	The father returns from his office and puts his coat back in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
18.50	The father goes to wash his hands in the	BATHROOM
19.00	The whole small family has supper in the	DINING-ROOM
20.00	The child goes to brush his teeth in the	BATHROOM
20.15	The child goes to bed in the	CHILD'S ROOM
20.30	The father and the mother go into the	SITTING-ROOM
	they watch television, or else they listen to the radio, or else they play cards, or else the father reads the newspaper while the mother does some sewing, in short they while away the time	
21.45	The father and the mother go and brush their teeth in the	BATHROOM
22.00	The father and the mother go to bed in their	BEDROOM

You will notice that in this model, which, I would stress, is both fictional and problematic, though I'm convinced of its elementary rightness (no one lives exactly like that, of course, but it is nevertheless like that, and not otherwise, that architects and town planners see us as living or want us to live), you will notice then, that, on the one hand, the sitting-room and bedroom are of hardly any more importance than the broom closet (the vacuum cleaner goes into the broom closet; exhausted bodies into the bedroom: the two functions are the same, of recuperation and maintenance) and, on the other hand, that my model would not be modified in any practical way if, instead of having, as here, spaces separated by partitions delimiting a bedroom, a sitting-room, a dining-room, a kitchen, etc., we envisaged, as is often done these days, a purportedly single, pseudo-modular space (living-room, sitting-room, etc.). We would then have, not a kitchen but a cooking-area, not a bedroom but a sleeping-area, not a dining-room but an eating-area.

It's not hard to imagine an apartment whose layout would depend, no longer on the activities of the day, but on functional relationships is between the rooms. That after all was how the so-called reception rooms were divided up ideally in the large town houses of the eighteenth century or the great bourgeois apartments of the *fin de siècle*: a sequence of drawing-rooms en suite, leading off a large vestibule, whose specification rested on minimal variations all revolving around the notion of reception: large drawing-room, small drawing-room, Monsieur's study, Madame's boudoir, smoking-room, library, billiard-room, etc.

It takes a little more imagination no doubt to picture an apartment whose layout was based on the functioning of the senses. We can imagine well enough what a gustatorium might be, or an auditory, but one might wonder what a seery might look like, or an smellery or a feelery.

It is hardly any more transgressive to conceive of a division

based, no longer on circadian, but on heptadian rhythms.¹ This would give us apartments of seven rooms, known respectively as the Mondayery, Tuesdayery, Wednesdayery, Thursdayery, Fridayery, Saturdayery, and Sundayery. These two last rooms, it should be observed, already exist in abundance, commercialized under the name of 'second' or 'weekend homes'. It's no more foolish to conceive of a room exclusively devoted to Mondays than to build villas that are only *used* for sixty days in the year. The Mondayery could ideally be a laundry-room (our country forebears did their washing on Mondays) and the Tuesdayery a drawing-room (our urban forebears were happy to receive visitors on Tuesdays). This, obviously, would hardly be a departure from the functional. It would be better, while we're at it, to imagine a thematic arrangement, roughly analogous to that which used to exist in brothels (after they were shut down, and until the fifties, they were turned into student hostels; several of my friends thus lived in a former '*maison*' in the Rue de l'Arcade, one in the 'torture chamber', another in the 'aeroplane' [bed shaped like a cockpit, fake portholes, etc.], a third in the 'trapper's cabin' [walls papered with fake logs, etc.]). The Mondayery, for example, would imitate a boat: you would sleep in hammocks, swab down the floor and eat fish. The Tuesdayery, why not, would commemorate one of Man's great victories over Nature, the discovery of the Pole (North or South, to choice), or the ascent of Everest: the room wouldn't be heated, you would sleep under thick furs, the diet would be based on pemmican (corned beef at the end of the month, dried beef when you're flush). The Wednesdayery would glorify children, obviously, being the day on which, for a long time now, they haven't had to go to school; it could be a sort of Dame Tartine's

1. A habitat based on a circa-annual rhythm exists among a few of the 'happy few' who are sufficiently well endowed with residences to be able to attempt to reconcile their sense of values, their liking for travel, climatic conditions and cultural imperatives. They are to be found, for example, in Mexico in January, in Switzerland in February, in Venice in March, in Marrakesh in April, in Paris in May, in Cyprus in June, in Bayreuth in July, in the Dordogne in August, in Scotland in September, in Rome in October, on the Côte d'Azur in November, and in London in December.

Palace,* gingerbread walls, furniture made from plasticine, etc.

4

A space without a use

I have several times tried to think of an apartment in which there would be a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It wouldn't be a junkroom, it wouldn't be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing.

For all my efforts, I found it impossible to follow this idea through to the end. Language itself, seemingly, proved unsuited to describing this nothing, this void, as if we could only speak of what is full, useful and functional.

A space without a function. Not 'without any precise function' but precisely without any function; not pluri-functional (everyone knows how to do that), but a-functional. It wouldn't obviously be a space intended solely to 'release' the others (lumber-room, cupboard, hanging space, storage space, etc.) but a space, I repeat, that would serve no purpose at all.

I sometimes manage to think of nothing, not even, like Raymond Queneau's Ami Pierrot,[†] of the death of Louis XVI. All of a sudden I realize I am here, that the Métro train has just stopped and that, having left Dugommier some ninety seconds before, I am now well and truly at Daumesnil. But, in the event, I haven't succeeded in thinking of nothing. How does one think of nothing? How to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole, into which one will hasten to put something, an activity, a function, a destiny, a gaze, a need, a lack, a surplus . . . ?

I have tried to follow wherever this limp idea led me. I have

*The reference is to a well-known French *comptine*, or nursery rhyme.

†In a novel called *Pierrot mon ami*.

encountered many unusable spaces and many unused spaces. But I wanted neither the unusable nor the unused, but the useless. How to expel functions, rhythms, habits, how to expel necessity? I imagined myself living in a vast apartment, so vast that I could never remember how many rooms it had (I had known, in the old days, but had forgotten, and knew I was too old now to start again on such a complicated enumeration). All the rooms, except one, were used for something. The whole point was to find this last room. It was no harder, when all's said and done, than for the readers in Borges's story of the 'Library of Babel' to find the book that held the key to all the others. Indeed, there is something almost vertiginously Borgesian in trying to imagine a room reserved for listening to Haydn's Symphony Number 48 in C, the so-called Maria Theresa, another devoted to reading the barometer or to cleaning my right big toe.

I thought of old Prince Bolkonsky who, in his anxiety as to the fate of his son, vainly searches all night long, from room to room, torch in hand, followed by his servant Tikhon carrying fur blankets, for the bed where he will be able finally to get to sleep. I thought of a science-fiction novel in which the very notion of habitat has vanished. I thought of another Borges story ('The Immortals'), in which men no longer inhabited by the need to live and to die have built ruined palaces and unusable staircases. I thought of engravings by Escher and paintings by Magritte. I thought of a gigantic Skinner's Box: a bedroom entirely hung in black, a solitary switch on the wall, by pressing which you can make something like a grey Maltese cross appear for a brief flash against a white background; I thought of the Great Pyramids and the church interiors of Saenredam;* I thought of something Japanese. I thought of the vague memory I had of a text by Heissenbüttel in which the narrator discovers a room without either doors or windows. I thought of the dreams I had had on this very subject, discovering a room I didn't know about in my own apartment.

I never managed anything that was really satisfactory. But I

*A Dutch painter (1597-1665).

don't think I was altogether wasting my time in trying to go beyond this improbable limit. The effort itself seemed to produce something that might be a statute of the inhabitable.

5

Moving out

Leaving an apartment. Vacating the scene. Decamping. Clearing up. Clearing out.

Making an inventory tidying up sorting out going through
Eliminating throwing away palming off on

Breaking

Burning

Taking down unfastening unnailing unsticking unscrewing
unhooking

Unplugging detaching cutting pulling dismantling folding
up cutting off

Rolling up

Wrapping up packing away strapping up tying piling up
assembling heaping up fastening wrapping protecting covering
surrounding locking

Removing carrying lifting

Sweeping

Closing

Leaving

Moving in

cleaning checking trying out changing fitting signing waiting
imagining inventing investing deciding bending folding
stooping sheathing fitting out stripping bare splitting turning
returning beating muttering rushing at kneading lining up
protecting covering over mixing ripping out slicing connecting
hiding setting going activating installing botching up sizing
breaking threading filtering tamping cramming sharpening

polishing making firm driving in pinning together hanging up
 arranging sawing fixing pinning up marking noting working
 out climbing measuring mastering seeing surveying pressing
 hard down on priming rubbing down painting rubbing scrap-
 ingconnecting climbing stumbling straddling mislaying finding
 again rummaging around getting nowhere brushing puttying
 stripping camouflaging puttying adjusting coming and going
 putting a gloss on allowing to dry admiring being surprised
 getting worked up growing impatient suspending judgment
 assessing adding up inserting sealing nailing screwing bolting
 sewing crouching perching moping centring reaching washing
 laundering evaluating reckoning smiling main taining sub-
 tracting multiplying kicking your heels roughing out buying
 acquiring receiving bringing back unpacking undoing edging
 framing rivetting observing considering musing fixing scoop-
 ing out wiping down the plaster camping out going thoroughly
 into raising procuring sitting down leaning against bracing
 yourself rinsing out unblocking completing sorting sweeping
 sighing whistling while you work moistening becoming very
 keen on pulling off sticking up glueing swearing insisting
 tracing rubbing down brushing painting drilling plugging in
 switching on starting up soldering bending unfixing sharpening
 aiming dillydallying shortening supporting shaking before
 using grinding going into raptures touching up botching
 scraping dusting manoeuvring pulverising balancing checking
 moistening stopping up emptying crushing roughing out
 explaining shrugging fitting the handle on dividing up walking
 up and down tightening timing juxtaposing bringing together
 matching whitewashing varnishing replacing the top insulating
 assessing pinning up arranging distempering hanging up
 starting again inserting spreading out washing looking for
 entering breathing hard
 settling in
 living in
 living

Doors

We protect ourselves, we barricade ourselves in. Doors stop and separate.

The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. On one side, me and *my place*, the private, the domestic (a space overfilled with my possessions: my bed, my carpet, my table, my typewriter, my books, my odd copies of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*); on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics. You can't simply let yourself slide from one into the other, can't pass from one to the other, neither in one direction nor in the other. You have to have the password, have to cross the threshold, have to show your credentials, have to communicate, just as the prisoner communicates with the world outside.

From the triangular shape and phenomenal size of the doors in the film of *Forbidden Planet*, you can deduce some of the morphological characteristics of their very ancient builders. The idea is as spectacular as it is gratuitous (why triangular?), but if there hadn't been any doors at all, we would have been able to draw far more startling conclusions.

How to be specific? It's not a matter of opening or not opening the door, not a matter of 'leaving the key in the door'. The problem isn't whether or not there are keys: if there wasn't a door, there wouldn't be a key.

It's hard obviously to imagine a house which doesn't have a door. I saw one one day, several years ago, in Lansing, Michigan. It had been built by Frank Lloyd Wright. You began by following a gently winding path to the left of which there rose up, very gradually, with an extreme nonchalance even, a slight declivity that was oblique to start with but which slowly approached the vertical. Bit by bit, as if by chance, without thinking, without your having any right at any given moment to declare that you had remarked anything like a transition, an interruption, a passage, a break in continuity, the path became stony, that's to say that at

first there was only grass, then there began to be stones in the middle of the grass, then there were a few more stones and it became like a paved, grassy walkway, while on your left, the slope of the ground began to resemble, very vaguely, a low wall, then a wall made of crazy paving. Then there appeared something like an open-work roof that was practically indissociable from the vegetation that had invaded it. In actual fact, it was already too late to know whether you were indoors or out. At the end of the path, the paving stones were set edge to edge and you found yourself in what is customarily called an entrance-hall, which opened directly on to a fairly enormous room that ended in one direction on a terrace graced by a large swimming-pool. The rest of the house was no less remarkable, not only for its comfort, its luxury even, but because you had the impression that it had slid on to its hillside like a cat curling itself up in a cushion.

The punch line of this anecdote is as moral as it is predictable. A dozen more or less similar houses were scattered through the surrounds of a private golf club. The course was entirely closed off. Guards who it was all too easy to imagine as being armed with sawn-off shotguns (I saw lots of American movies in my youth) were on duty at the one entrance gate.

Staircases

We don't think enough about staircases.

Nothing was more beautiful in old houses than the staircases. Nothing is uglier, colder, more hostile, meaner, in today's apartment buildings.

We should learn to live more on staircases. But how?

Walls

'Granted there is a wall, what's going on behind it?'

Jean Tardieu

I put a picture up on a wall. Then I forget there is a wall. I no longer know what there is behind this wall, I no longer know there is a wall, I no longer know this wall is a wall, I no longer know what a wall is. I no longer know that in my apartment there are walls, and that if there weren't any walls, there would be no apartment. The wall is no longer what delimits and defines the place where I live, that which separates it from the other places where other people live, it is nothing more than a support for the picture. But I also forget the picture, I no longer look at it, I no longer know how to look at it. I have put the picture on the wall so as to forget there was a wall, but in forgetting the wall, I forget the picture, too. There are pictures because there are walls. We have to be able to forget there are walls, and have found no better way to do that than pictures. Pictures efface walls. But walls kill pictures. So we need continually to be changing, either the wall or the picture, to be forever putting other pictures up on the walls, or else constantly moving the picture from one wall to another.

We could write on our walls (as we sometimes write on the fronts of houses, on fences round building sites and on the walls of prisons), but we do it only very rarely.

The Apartment Building

1

Project for a novel

I imagine a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed – a sort of equivalent to the roof that is lifted off in *Le Diable boiteux*, or to the scene with the game of go in *The Tale of Genji* – so that all the rooms in the front, from the ground floor up to the attics, are instantly and simultaneously visible.

The novel – whose title is *Life a User's Manual* – restricts itself (if I dare use that verb for a project that will finally extend to something like four hundred pages) to describing the rooms thus unveiled and the activities unfolding in them, the whole in accordance with formal procedures which it doesn't seem necessary to go into here in detail, but the mere stating of which seems to me rather alluring: a polygraph of the moves made by a chess knight (adapted, what's more, to a board of 10 squares by 10), a pseudo-queenine of order 10, an orthogonal Latin bi-square of order 10 (the one that Euler conjectured didn't exist, but which was demonstrated in 1960 by Bose, Parker and Shrikhande).*

This project has more than one source. One is a drawing by Saul Steinberg that appeared in *The Art of Living* (1952) and

*This obscure formula describes the complex structure underlying the multiple (to say the least) narratives of Perec's wonderful novel, *Life a User's Manual*. A 'bi-square' is an elaboration on the familiar 'magic square' in which no number recurs and in which all the rows and columns add up to the same total. In a 'bi-square' each space or location is occupied by two elements instead of just one: e.g. by a letter of the alphabet as well as a number or by two numbers drawn from independent series. Perec's 'bi-square' has ten locations in each direction and thus is 'of order 10'. A 'queenine' is a mathematical formula invented as a formal constraint in the writing of poetry by Raymond Queneau – hence its name. A fuller description of these devices can be found in David Bellos's *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*.

shows a rooming-house (you can tell it's a rooming-house because next to the door there is a notice bearing the words *No Vacancy*) part of the façade of which has been removed, allowing you to see the interior of some twenty-three rooms (I say 'some' because you can also see through into some of the back rooms). The mere inventory – and it could never be exhaustive – of the items of furniture and the actions represented has something truly vertiginous about it:

- 3 bathrooms. The one on the third floor is empty, in the one on the second, a woman is taking a bath; in the one on the ground floor, a man is having a shower.
- 3 fireplaces, varying greatly in size, but all on the one axis. None of them is working (no one has lit a fire in them, if you prefer). The ones on the first and second floors are equipped with fire-dogs; the one on the first floor is split into two by a partition which also divides the mouldings and the ceiling rose.
- 6 candelabra and one Calder-style mobile
- 5 telephones
- 1 upright piano with stool
- 10 adult individuals of the male sex, of whom
 - 1 is having a drink
 - 1 is typing
 - 2 are reading the newspaper, one sitting in an armchair, the other stretched out on a divan
 - 3 are asleep
 - 1 is having a shower
 - 1 is eating toast
 - 1 is coming through the doorway into a room where there is a dog
- 10 adult individuals of the female sex, of whom
 - 1 is doing her chores
 - 1 is sitting down
 - 1 is holding a baby in her arms
 - 2 are reading, one, sitting down, the newspaper, the other, lying down, a novel
 - 1 is doing the washing-up

- 1 is having a bath
- 1 is knitting
- 1 is eating toast
- 1 is sleeping
- 6 young children, 2 of whom are certainly little girls and 2 certainly little boys
- 2 dogs
- 2 cats
- 1 bear on wheels
- 1 small horse on wheels
- 1 toy train
- 1 doll in a pram
- 6 rats or mice
- a fair number of termites (it's not certain they are termites; the sorts of animals in any case that live in floorboards and walls)
- at least 38 pictures or framed engravings
- 1 negro mask
- 29 lights (over and above the candelabra)
- 10 beds
- 1 child's cot
- 3 divans, one of which serves uncomfortably as a bed
- 4 kitchens or rather kitchenettes
- 7 rooms with parquet flooring
- 1 carpet
- 2 bedside rugs or mats
- 9 rooms where the floor is no doubt covered with moquette
- 3 rooms with tiled floors
- 1 interior staircase
- 8 pedestal tables
- 5 coffee tables
- 5 small bookcases
- 1 shelf full of books
- 2 clocks
- 5 chests of drawers
- 2 tables
- 1 desk with drawers with blotting-pad and inkwell
- 2 pairs of shoes

- 1 bathroom stool
- 11 upright chairs
- 2 armchairs
- 1 leather briefcase
- 1 dressing gown
- 1 hanging cupboard
- 1 alarm clock
- 1 pair of bathroom scales
- 1 pedal bin
- 1 hat hanging on a peg
- 1 suit hanging on a hanger
- 1 jacket hanging on the back of a chair
- washing drying
- 3 small bathroom cabinets
- several bottles and flasks
- numerous objects hard to identify (carriage clocks, ashtrays, spectacles, glasses, saucers full of peanuts, for example)

Which is to describe only the 'defacaded' part of the building. The remaining quarter of the drawing enables us to register a section of pavement strewn with rubbish (old newspaper, tin can, three envelopes), an overflowing dustbin, a porch, once luxurious now tatty, and five figures at the windows: on the second floor, amidst potplants, an old man smoking his pipe with his dog, on the third floor, a bird in its cage, a woman and a young girl.

I fancy it is summertime. It must be something like eight o'clock in the evening (it's odd that the children aren't in bed). Television hasn't been invented yet. There's not a single radio set to be seen either. The owner of the building is no doubt the woman who is knitting (she isn't on the first floor, as I first of all thought, but, in view of the position of the porch, on the ground floor, and what I've been calling the ground floor is in fact a basement – the house has only two storeys). She has fallen on hard times and has been forced, not only to turn her house into a rooming-house, but to divide her best rooms into two.

Examine the drawing a bit more closely and the details of a

voluminous novel could easily be extracted from it. It's obvious, for example, that we are at a time when the fashion is for curly hair (three women have curlers in). The gentleman asleep on his uncomfortable divan is no doubt a teacher; the leather briefcase belongs to him and on his desk he has something that looks very much like a pile of school exercises. The woman doing her chores is the mother of the girl who is sitting down and it's extremely likely that the gentleman leaning on the mantelpiece, a glass in his hand and looking somewhat perplexedly at the Calder-style mobile, is her future son-in-law. As for her neighbour, who has four children and a cat, he seems to be slaving away at his typewriter like someone whose manuscript the publisher has been waiting for the past three weeks.

2

Things we ought to do systematically, from time to time

In the building you live in:

go and call on your neighbours; look at what there is on the party wall, for example; confirm, or belie, the homotopology of the accommodation. See what use they have made of it;

notice how unfamiliar things may come to seem as a result of taking staircase B instead of staircase A, or of going up to the fifth floor when you live on the second;

try to imagine on what a collective existence might be based, within the confines of this same building. (In an old house in the 18th arrondissement I saw a WC that was shared by four tenants. The landlord refused to pay for the lighting of the said WC, and none of the four tenants was willing to pay for the three others, or had accepted the idea of a single meter and a bill divisible into four. So the WC was lit by four separate bulbs, each controlled by one of the four tenants. A single bulb

burning night and day for ten years would have obviously been less expensive than installing a single one of these exclusive circuits.)

In apartment buildings in general:

look closely at them;

look upwards;

look for the name of the architect, the name of the contractor, the date when it was built;

ask yourself why it often says 'gas on every floor';

in the case of a new building, try to remember what was there before;

etc.

The Street

1

The buildings stand one beside the other. They form a straight line. They are expected to form a line, and it's a serious defect in them when they don't do so. They are then said to be 'subject to alignment', meaning that they can by rights be demolished, so as to be rebuilt in a straight line with the others.

The parallel alignment of two series of buildings defines what is known as a street. The street is a space bordered, generally on its two longest sides, by houses; the street is what separates houses from each other, and also what enables us to get from one house to another, by going either along or across the street. In addition, the street is what enables us to identify the houses. Various systems of identification exist. The most widespread, in our own day and our part of the world, consists in giving a name to the street and numbers to the houses. The naming of streets is an extremely complex, often even thorny, topic, about which several books might be written. And numbering isn't that much simpler. It was decided, first, that even numbers would be put on one side and odd numbers on the other (but, as a character in Raymond Queneau's *The Flight of Icarus* very rightly asks himself, 'Is 13A an even or an odd number?'); secondly, that the even numbers would be on the right (and odd numbers on the left) relative to the direction of the street; and thirdly, that the said direction of the street would be determined generally (but we know of many exceptions) by the position of the said street in relation to a fixed axis, in the event the River Seine. Streets parallel with the Seine are numbered starting upstream, perpendicular streets starting from the Seine and going away from it (these explanations apply

to Paris obviously; one might reasonably suppose that analogous solutions have been thought up for other towns).

Contrary to the buildings, which almost always belong to someone, the streets in principle belong to no one. They are divided up, fairly equitably, into a zone reserved for motor vehicles, known as the roadway, and two zones, narrower obviously, reserved for pedestrians, which are called pavements. A certain number of streets are reserved exclusively for pedestrians, either permanently, or else on particular occasions. The zones of contact between the roadway and the pavements enable motorists who don't wish to go on driving to park. The number of motor vehicles not wishing to go on driving being much greater than the number of spaces available, the possibilities of parking have been restricted, either, within certain perimeters known as 'blue zones', by limiting the amount of parking time, or else, more generally, by installing paid parking.

Only infrequently are there trees in the streets. When there are, they have railings round them. On the other hand, most streets are equipped with specific amenities corresponding to various services. Thus there are street lights which go on automatically as soon as the daylight begins to decline to any significant degree; stopping places at which passengers can wait for buses or taxis; telephone kiosks, public benches; boxes into which citizens may put letters which the postal services will come to collect at set times; clockwork mechanisms intended to receive the money necessary for a limited amount of parking time; baskets reserved for waste paper and other detritus, into which numbers of people compulsively cast a furtive glance as they pass; traffic lights. There are likewise traffic signs indicating, for example, that it is appropriate to park on this side of the street or that according to whether we are in the first or second fortnight of the month (what is known as 'alternate side parking'), or that silence is to be observed in the vicinity of a hospital, or, finally and especially, that the street is one-way. Such is the density of motor traffic indeed that movement would be almost impossible if it had not become customary, in

the last few years, in a majority of built-up areas, to force motorists to circulate in one direction only, which, obviously, sometimes obliges them to make long detours.

At certain road junctions deemed especially dangerous, communication between the pavements and the roadway, normally free, has been prevented by means of metal posts linked by chains. Identical posts, set into the pavements themselves, serve sometimes to stop motor vehicles from coming and parking on the pavements, which they would frequently tend to do if they weren't prevented. In certain circumstances, finally – military parades, Heads of State driving past, etc. – entire sections of the roadway may be put out of bounds by means of light metal barriers that fit one inside the other.

At certain points in the pavement, curved indentations, familiarly known as '*bateaux*',* indicate that there may be motor vehicles parked inside the buildings themselves which should always be able to get out. At other points, small earthenware tiles set into the edge of the pavement indicate that this section of the pavement is reserved for the parking of hire vehicles.

The junction of the roadway and the pavements is known as the gutter. This area has a very slight incline, thanks to which rainwater can flow off into the drainage system underneath the street, instead of spreading right across the roadway, which would be a considerable impediment to the traffic. For several centuries, there was only one gutter, to be found in the middle of the roadway, but the current system is thought to be better suited. Should there be a shortage of rainwater, the upkeep of the roadway and pavements can be effected thanks to hydrants installed at almost every intersection; these can be opened with the help of the T-shaped keys with which the council employees responsible for cleaning the streets are provided.

In principle, it is always possible to pass from one side of the street to the other by using the pedestrian crossings that motor vehicles

must only drive over with extreme caution. These crossings are signalled, either by two parallel rows of metal studs, perpendicular to the axis of the street, whose heads have a diameter of about twelve centimetres, or else by broad bands of white paint running at an angle across the whole width of the street. This system of studded or painted crossings no longer seems as effective as it no doubt was in the old days, and it is often necessary to duplicate it by a system of traffic lights of three colours (red, amber and green) which, as they have multiplied, have ended up causing extraordinarily complex problems of synchronization that certain of the world's largest computers and certain of what are held to be the age's most brilliant mathematical brains are working tirelessly to resolve.

At various points, remote-controlled cameras keep an eye on what is going on. There is one on top of the Chambre des Députés, just underneath the big tricolour; another in the Place Edmond-Rostand, in continuation of the Boulevard Saint-Michel; others still at Alésia, the Place Clichy, the Châtelet, the Place de la Bastille, etc.

2

I saw two blind people in the Rue Linné. They were walking holding one another by the arm. They both had long, exceedingly flexible sticks. One of the two was a woman of about fifty, the other quite a young man. The woman was feeling all the vertical obstacles that stood along the pavement with the tip of her stick, and guiding the young man's stick so that he, too, touched them, indicating to him, very quickly and without ever being mistaken, what the obstacles consisted of: a street light, a bus stop, a telephone kiosk, a waste-paper bin, a post box, a road sign (she wasn't able to specify what the sign said obviously), a red light . . .

*Called 'boats' because of their shape.

3

Practical exercises

Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps.

Apply yourself. Take your time.

Note down the place: the terrace of a café near the junction of
the Rue de Bac and the Boulevard
Saint-Germain

the time: seven o' clock in the evening

the date: 15 May 1973

the weather: set fair

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on. Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you?

Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see.

You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.

The street: try to describe the street, what it's made of, what it's used for. The people in the street. The cars. What sort of cars? The buildings: note that they're on the comfortable, well-heeled side. Distinguish residential from official buildings.

The shops. What do they sell in the shops? There are no food shops. Oh yes, there's a baker's. Ask yourself where the locals do their shopping.

The cafés. How many cafés are there? One, two, three, four. Why did you choose this one? Because you know it, because it's in the sun, because it sells cigarettes. The other shops: antique shops, clothes, hi-fi, etc. Don't say, don't write 'etc.'. Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid. You still haven't looked at anything, you've merely picked out what you've long ago picked out.

Force yourself to see more flatly.

Detect a rhythm: the passing of cars. The cars arrive in clumps because they've been stopped by a red light further up or down the street.

Count the cars.

Look at the number plates. Distinguish between the cars registered in Paris and the rest.

Note the absence of taxis precisely when there seem to be a lot of people waiting for them.

Read what's written in the street: Morris columns,* newspaper kiosks, posters, traffic signs, graffiti, discarded handouts, shop signs.

Beauty of the women.

The fashion is for heels that are too high.

Decipher a bit of the town, deduce the obvious facts: the obsession with ownership, for example. Describe the number of operations the driver of a vehicle is subjected to when he parks merely in order to go and buy a hundred grams of fruit jelly:

- parks by means of a certain amount of toing and froing
- switches off the engine
- withdraws the key, setting off a first anti-theft device
- extricates himself from the vehicle
- winds up the left-hand front window
- locks it
- checks that the left-hand rear door is locked;
- if not:
 - opens it
 - raises the handle inside
 - slams the door
 - checks it's locked securely

*The sturdy columns that carry posters advertising theatrical and other entertainments.

- circles the car; if need be, checks that the boot is locked properly
- checks that the right-hand rear door is locked; if not, recommences the sequence of operations already carried out on the left-hand rear door
- winds up the right-hand front window
- shuts the right-hand front door
- locks it
- before walking away, looks all around him as if to make sure the car is still there and that no one will come and take it away.

Decipher a bit of the town. Its circuits: why do the buses go from this place to that? Who chooses the routes, and by what criteria? Remember that the trajectory of a Paris bus *intra muros* is defined by a two-figure number the first figure of which describes the central and the second the peripheral terminus. Find examples, find exceptions: all the buses whose number begins with a 2 start from the Gare St-Lazare, with a 3 from the Gare de l'Est. All the buses whose number ends in a 2 terminate roughly speaking in the 16th arrondissement or in Boulogne.

(Before, they used letters: the S, which was Queneau's favourite, has become the 84. Wax sentimental over the memory of buses that had a platform at the back, the shape of the tickets, the ticket collector with his little machine hooked on to his belt.)

The people in the streets: where are they coming from? Where are they going to? Who are they?

People in a hurry. People going slowly. Parcels. Prudent people who've taken their macs. Dogs: they're the only animals to be seen. You can't see any birds – yet you know there are birds – and can't hear them either. You might see a cat slip underneath a car, but it doesn't happen.

Nothing is happening, in fact.

Try to classify the people: those who live locally and those who don't live locally. There don't seem to be any tourists. The season doesn't lend itself to it, and anyway the area isn't especially touristy. What are the local attractions? Salomon Bernard's house? The church of St Thomas Aquinas? No 5, Rue Sébastien-Bottin?*

Time passes. Drink your beer. Wait.

Note that the trees are a long way off (on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Boulevard Raspail), that there are no cinemas or theatres, that there are no building sites to be seen, that most of the houses seem to have obeyed the regulations so far as renovation is concerned.

A dog, of an uncommon breed (Afghan hound? saluki?).

A Land Rover that seems to be equipped for crossing the Sahara (in spite of yourself, you're only noting the untoward, the peculiar, the wretched exceptions; the opposite is what you should be doing).

Carry on

Until the scene becomes improbable until you have the impression, for the briefest of moments, that you are in a strange town or, better still, until you can no longer understand what is happening or is not happening, until the whole place becomes strange, and you no longer even know that this is what is called a town, a street, buildings, pavements . . .

Make torrential rain fall, smash everything, make grass grow, replace the people by cows and, where the Rue de Bac meets the Boulevard Saint-Germain, make King Kong appear, or Tex Avery's herculean mouse, towering a hundred metres above the roofs of the buildings!

Or again: strive to picture to yourself, with the greatest possible

*The address of the largest and most glamorous of French publishing houses, Editions Gallimard, by whom Perec would like to have been published, though he never was.

precision, beneath the network of streets, the tangle of sewers, the lines of the Métro, the invisible underground proliferation of conduits (electricity, gas, telephone lines, water mains, express letter tubes), without which no life would be possible on the surface.

Underneath, just underneath, resuscitate the eocene: the limestone, the marl and the soft chalk, the gypsum, the lacustrine Saint-Ouen limestone, the Beauchamp sands, the rough limestone, the Soissons sands and lignites, the plastic clay, the hard chalk.

4
Or else:
Rough draft of a letter

I think of you, often
sometimes I go back into a café, I sit near the door, I order a coffee
I arrange my packet of cigarettes, a box of matches, a writing pad,
my felt-pen on the fake marble table

I spend a long time stirring my cup of coffee with the teaspoon
(yet I don't put any sugar in my coffee, I drink it allowing the
sugar to melt in my mouth, like the people of the North, like the
Russians and Poles when they drink tea)

I pretend to be preoccupied, to be reflecting, as if I had a decision
to make

At the top and to the right of the sheet of paper, I inscribe the
date, sometimes the place, sometimes the time, I pretend to be
writing a letter

I write slowly, very slowly, as slowly as I can, I trace, I draw each
letter, each accent, I check the punctuation marks

I stare attentively at a small notice, the price-list for ice-creams,
at a piece of ironwork, a blind, the hexagonal yellow ashtray (in
actual fact, it's an equilateral triangle, in the cutoff corners of
which semi-circular dents have been made where cigarettes can
be rested)

(...)

Outside there's a bit of sunlight
the café is nearly empty
two renovators' men are having a rum at the bar, the owner is
dozing behind his till, the waitress is cleaning the coffee machine

I am thinking of you
you are walking in your street, it's wintertime, you've turned up
your foxfur collar, you're smiling, and remote

(...)

5
Places
(Notes on a work in progress)

In 1969, I chose, in Paris, twelve places (streets, squares, circuses,
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, the posters,
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, whether events that have taken
place there, or people I have met there. Once these descriptions
are finished, I slip them into an envelope that I seal with wax.
On several occasions, I have got a man or woman photographer
friend to go with me to the places I was describing who, either
freely, or as indicated by me, took photographs that I then slipped,
without looking at them (with a single exception), into the corre-
sponding envelopes. I have also had occasion to slip into these
envelopes various items capable later on of serving as evidence:
Métro tickets, for example, or bar slips, or cinema tickets, or
handouts, etc.

I begin these descriptions over again each year, taking care, thanks to an algorithm I have already referred to (orthogonal Latin bi-square, this time of order 12*), first, to describe each of these places in a different month of the year, second, never to describe the same pair of places in the same month.

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. I was too taken up last year by the filming of 'Un Homme qui dort' (in which, as it happens, most of these places appear), so I in fact skipped 1973, and only in 1981 shall I be in possession (if, that is, I don't fall behind again) of the 288 texts issuing from this experiment. I shall then know whether it was worth the effort. What I hope for from it, in effect, is nothing other than the record of a threefold experience of ageing: of the places themselves, of my memories, and of my writing.

The Neighbourhood

1

The neighbourhood. What is a neighbourhood? D'you live in the neighbourhood? You from the neighbourhood? Moved neighbourhoods, have you? You're in which neighbourhood now?

There's something amorphous about the neighbourhood really: a sort of parish or, strictly speaking, a *quartier* or fourth part of an arrondissement, the small portion of a town dependent on a police station.

More generally: that portion of the town you can get around easily in on foot or, to say the same thing in the form of a truism, that part of the town you don't need to go to, precisely because you're already there. That seems to go without saying. It still needs to be made clear, however, that for most of a town's inhabitants, this has the corollary that the neighbourhood is also that portion of the town in which you don't work. The neighbourhood is what we call the area where we reside, not the area where we work: places of residence and places of work hardly ever coincide. This too is self-evident, but it has countless consequences.

Neighbourhood life

This is a very big word.

Agreed, there are the neighbours, the locals, the tradespeople, the dairy, the everything for the home, the tobacconist who stays open on Sundays, the chemist, the post office, the café where you are, if not an habitué then at least a regular (you shake hands with the *patron* or the waitress).

Obviously, you could cultivate these habits, always go to the

*The same schema as Perec used for *Life: A User's Manual* – see the note on p.40; 'of order 12' means simply a 12×12 square as opposed to one 10×10 .

same butcher's, leave your parcels at the *épicerie*, open an account at the ironmonger's, call the pharmacist by her first name, entrust your cat to the woman who sells newspapers, but it wouldn't work, it still wouldn't make a life, couldn't even give the illusion of being a life. It would create a familiar space, would give rise to an itinerary (leave home, go and buy the evening paper, a packet of cigarettes, a packet of soap powder, a kilo of cherries, etc.), a pretext for a few limp handshakes (morning Madame Chamissac, morning Monsieur Fernand, morning Mademoiselle Jeanne), but that would only ever be putting a mawkish face on necessity, a way of dressing up commercialism.

Obviously, you could start an orchestra, or put on street theatre. Bring the neighbourhood alive, as they say. Weld the people of a street or a group of streets together by something more than a mere connivance: by making demands on them, making them fight.

Death of the neighbourhood

This too is a very big word

(many other things are dying after all: towns, the countryside, etc.).

What I miss above all is the neighbourhood cinema, with its ghastly advertisements for the dry cleaner's on the corner.

2

From all of the foregoing I can draw the, truth to tell, less than satisfying conclusion that I have only a very approximate idea of what a neighbourhood is. It's true that in recent years I've changed neighbourhoods quite a few times; I haven't had time to get properly used to one.

I make little use of my neighbourhood. It's only by chance that some of my friends live in the same neighbourhood as I do. Relative to my dwelling-place, my main centres of interest are

somewhat eccentric. I have nothing against the act of moving, quite the reverse.

Why not set a higher value on dispersal? Instead of living in just one place, and trying in vain to gather yourself together there, why not have five or six rooms dotted about Paris? I'd go and sleep in Denfert, I'd write in the Place Voltaire, I'd listen to music in the Place Clichy, I'd make love at the Poterne des Peupliers,* I'd eat in the Rue de la Tombe-Issoire, I'd read by the Parc Monceau, etc. Is that any more foolish, when all's said and done, than putting all the furniture shops in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, all the glassware shops in the Rue de Paradis, all the tailors in the Rue du Sentier, all the Jews in the Rue des Rosiers, all the students in the Latin Quarter, all the publishers in Saint-Sulpice, all the doctors in Harley Street, all the blacks in Harlem?

*A leafy spot in the 13th arrondissement.

The Town

1

'The roofs of Paris, lying on their backs, with their little paws in the air.'

Raymond Queneau

Don't be too hasty in trying to find a definition of the town; it's far too big and there's every chance of getting it wrong.

First, make an inventory of what you can see. List what you're sure of. Draw up elementary distinctions: for example, between what is the town and what isn't the town.

Concern yourself with what divides the town from what isn't the town. Look at what happens when the town stops. For example (I've already touched on this subject in connection with streets), one absolutely foolproof method for telling whether you're in Paris or outside Paris consists of looking at the numbers of the buses. If they have two digits, you're in Paris, if they have three digits, you're outside Paris (it isn't, alas, as foolproof as all that, but in principle it ought to be).

Recognize that suburbs have a strong tendency not to remain as suburbs.

Take good note that the town hasn't always been what it was. Remember, for example, that for a long time Auteuil was in the country. Up until the middle of the 19th century, when doctors saw that a child had a bit too much pallor, they recommended the parents to go and spend a few days in Auteuil to breathe the good country air (there's still a dairy in Auteuil, as it happens, which persists in calling itself 'Auteuil Farm').

Remember, too, that the Arc de Triomphe was built in the country (it wasn't really the country, more the equivalent of the Bois de Boulogne, but it wasn't really the town all the same).

Remember, too, that Saint-Denis, Bagnolet and Aubervilliers are far more sizeable towns than Poitiers, Annecy or Saint-Nazaire.

Remember that everything calling itself a 'faubourg' used to be outside the town (Faubourg Saint-Antoine, Faubourg Saint-Denis, Faubourg Saint-Germain, Faubourg Saint-Honoré).

Remember that if they said Saint-Germain-des-Prés, it's because there were *prés*, or fields, there.

Remember that a 'boulevard' was originally a walk planted with trees which circled the town and usually occupied the space where the old ramparts had been.

Remember, indeed, that it was fortified.

2

The wind comes off the sea: nauseous town smells are driven towards the East in Europe, towards the West in America. That's the reason why the smart districts are in the West in Paris (the 16th arrondissement, Neuilly, Saint-Cloud, etc.) and London (the West End), and in the East in New York (the East Side).

3

A town: stone, concrete, asphalt. Strangers, monuments, institutions.

Megalopolises. Urban sprawl. Traffic arteries. Crowds.

Ant-hills?

What is the heart of a town? The soul of a town? Why is a town said to be beautiful, or said to be ugly? What's beautiful and what's ugly in a town? How do you get to know a town? How do you get to know your town?

Method: you must either give up talking of the town, about the town, or else force yourself to talk about it as simply as possible, obviously, familiarly. Get rid of all preconceived ideas. Stop

thinking in ready-made terms, forget what the town planners and sociologists have said.

There's something frightening in the very idea of the town; you get the impression you can fasten only on to tragic or despairing images of it — Metropolis, the mineral universe, the world turned to stone — that you can only go on endlessly piling up unanswerable questions.

We shall never be able to explain or justify the town. The town is there. It's our space, and we have no other. We were born in towns. We grew up in towns. It's in towns that we breathe. When we catch the train, it's to go from one town to another town. There's nothing inhuman in a town, unless it's our own humanity.

4

My town

I live in Paris. It's the capital of France. At the time when France was called Gaul, Paris was called Lutetia.

Like a lot of other towns, Paris was built in the immediate proximity of seven hills. They are: the Mont Valérien, Montmartre, Montparnasse, Montsouris, the Colline de Chaillot, the Buttes-Chaumont and the Butte-aux-Cailles, the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, etc.

Obviously, I don't know all the streets of Paris. But I always have some idea of where they're to be found. Even if I wanted to, I'd find it hard to be lost in Paris. I have numerous landmarks to help me. I nearly always know in which direction I need to go on the Métro. I know the itineraries of the buses pretty well. I can explain the route I want to take to a taxi-driver. The names of the streets are hardly ever alien to me, the characteristics of each district are familiar. I can identify the churches and other monuments without too much difficulty. I know where the railway stations are. Numerous locations have precise memories attached to them: houses where friends once lived that I've lost touch with, or else a café in which I played pinball for six hours at a stretch (for an original outlay of a single 20-centimes coin), or else the

square in which I read Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin* while keeping an eye on my little niece as she played.

I like walking in Paris. Sometimes for a whole afternoon, without any precise goal, not really haphazardly, or at random, but trying to let myself be carried along. Sometimes by taking the first bus that stops (you can no longer get on buses when they're moving). Or else by preparing a careful, systematic itinerary. If I had the time, I'd like to think up and solve problems analogous to the one about the bridges of Königsberg* or, for example, find a route that would cross Paris from one side to the other taking only streets beginning with the letter C.

I like my town, but I can't say exactly what I like about it. I don't think it's the smell. I'm too accustomed to the monuments to want to look at them. I like certain lights, a few bridges, café terraces. I love passing through a place I haven't seen for a long time.

5

Foreign towns

You know how to get from the station, or the air terminal, to your hotel. You hope that it isn't too far. You'd like to be central. You study the map of the town with care. You locate the museums, the parks, the places you've been strongly recommended to go and see.

You go and see the paintings and the churches. You'd love to stroll about, to loaf, but you don't dare; you don't know how to drift aimlessly, you're afraid of getting lost. You don't even walk really, you stride. You don't really know what to look at. You're moved almost if you come across the Air France office, on the verge of tears almost if you see *Le Monde* on a news stand. There's nowhere that lets itself be attached to a memory, an emotion, a

*This refers to a celebrated old puzzle, as to whether it was possible to walk round the city of Königsberg, which had seven bridges, crossing each bridge once and no bridge twice. The solution was found in 1736 by the great Swiss mathematician, Leonhard Euler.

face. You locate tearooms, cafeterias, milk-bars, taverns, restaurants. You go past a statue. It's that of Ludwig Spankerfel di Nominatore, the celebrated brewer. You look with interest at a complete set of monkey wrenches (you've got two hours to waste and you walk for two hours; why should you be drawn more particularly by this rather than that? A neutral space, not yet invested, practically without landmarks: you don't know how long it takes to get from one place to another; as a result you're always horribly ahead of time).

Two days may be enough to start to get acclimatized. The day you find out that the statue of Ludwig Spankerfel di Nominatore (the celebrated brewer) is only three minutes from your hotel (at the end of Prince Adalbert Street) whereas you've been taking a good half-hour to get there, you start to take possession of the town. That doesn't mean you start to inhabit it.

We often preserve the memory of an indefinable charm from these towns we've merely brushed against. The memory indeed of our own indecision, our hesitant footsteps, our gaze which didn't know what to turn towards and that found almost anything affecting: an almost empty street lined with large plane trees (were they planes?) in Belgrade, the ceramic tiles on a façade in Saarbrücken, the sloping streets in Edinburgh, the width of the Rhine at Basle, and the rope – the exact term for it would be the suspension cable – guiding the ferry that crosses it . . .

6

On tourism

'As for seeing the town, that never entered his head, he being of the English race that makes its servants visit the countries they pass through.'

Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*

Rather than visit London, stay at home, in the chimney corner, and read the irreplaceable information supplied by Baedeker (1907 edition):

The season, that is the months of May, June and July, is the most favourable time of year for visiting London. It is now that Parliament is sitting, the aristocracy are at their town-residences, the greatest artistes in the world are performing at the Opera and the picture exhibitions are open. The remainder of the country may be visited all year round, with the exception of the mountains.

. . . If no policeman is to be found in the vicinity, ask for information in a shop. Address a stranger only in cases of absolute necessity, and do not reply to any question from a passer-by, especially in French, for the question is probably the prelude to a theft or confidence trick. The foreigner should remain constantly on his guard and above all keep careful watch on his purse and his timepiece. This recommendation must be borne in mind when boarding a train or omnibus, as well as when alighting, everywhere in short where there is a crowd. It will be noted that it is customary for pedestrians to keep to the right in crowded streets. Avoid also, in the evenings, the poor areas of the town and out-of-the-way streets.

The Metropolitan Railways . . . are an important means of effecting long journeys in London. They pass for the most part a short distance below the surface of the ground, in tunnels or cuttings bordered by high walls . . . The trains run on the inner belt from 5.30 a.m. until around midnight . . . One buys a ticket at the booking-office and descends to the railway. At the bottom of the first flight of stairs, the official who checks the tickets indicates the correct platform, while the tickets themselves are marked with a large red 'O' or 'I' (for 'outer' or 'inner' line of rails). A telegraph-board indicates the destination of the 'next train', and the terminus towards which the train is travelling is also generally placarded on the front of the locomotive. The names of the stations are called out by the porters, and are always painted at different parts of the platform and on the lamps and benches, though frequently difficult to distinguish from the surrounding advertisements. As the stoppages are extremely brief, no time should be lost either in taking seats or in alighting.

Doctors. Recommended are doctors: L. Vintras, doctor to the French Embassy and the French Hospital; H. de Méric (surgeon); H. Dardenne; P. J. Baranoff, doctor at the French Hospital; Naumann, doctor at the Italian Hospital. Dentists: A. A. Goldsmith (American); K. A. Davenport (American); H. L. Coffin (American); Pierrepont (American), etc. Pharmacies (no French pharmacy).

Time-table: two weeks are barely sufficient, even for an indefatigable

traveller content merely with a superficial visit, to have a reasonably clear idea of London and its environs. A methodical distribution of the time will greatly facilitate the task . . . in the mornings and afternoons one can go to visit the churches, many of which remain open all day, and walk in the parks or the botanical and zoological gardens. In the afternoon, from 5 to 7 p.m. before dinner, a turn may be taken in Regent Street or Hyde Park, always animated, with a dense crowd of brilliant horsemen and a large number of équipages. If one is in the vicinity of London Bridge, one should take advantage of every available moment to visit the port and its environs, the ships arriving or departing and the enormous traffic in the docks. For those wishing to enjoy a grand spectacle, unique in the world, the excursion to Gravesend is especially recommended.

7

Exercises

Describe the operations you effect when you catch the Métro with the same meticulousness as Baedeker for the London Underground in 1907.

Reconsider some of the proposals made by the Surrealists for embellishing the town:

The obelisk in the Concorde: round it off and put a steel feather of the right size on the summit

The Tour Saint-Jacques: bend it slightly

The lion of Belfort: have it gnawing a bone and turned to the West

The Panthéon: slice it vertically and separate the two halves by 50 centimetres

By using maps and the appropriate diagrams, try and work out an itinerary that would enable you to take every bus in the capital one after the other.

Try and imagine what Paris will become:

Paris will become a winter garden; espaliered fruit trees on the boulevard.

The Seine filtered and warm – an abundance of fake gemstones – a profusion of gilding – the houses lit up – the light will be stored, for

there are bodies that have this property, such as sugar, the flesh of certain molluscs and Bologna phosphorus. The fronts of the houses will be made to be daubed with this phosphorescent substance, and their radiance will light the streets.

Gustave Flaubert,
Drafts for the final plan of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*

The Countryside

1

I don't have a lot to say concerning the country: the country doesn't exist, it's an illusion.

For most people of my kind, the country is a decorative space surrounding their second home, bordering a part of the motorways they take on Friday evenings when they go there, and a few metres of which they will pass through, if they have the courage, on Sunday afternoons, before regaining the town, where, throughout the whole of the rest of the week, they will be hymning the return to nature.

Like everyone else, however, I've been to the country on several occasions (the last time, if I remember rightly, was in February 1973; it was very cold). What's more, I like the country (I like the town too, as I've already said, I'm not hard to please). I like being in the country: you eat country bread, you breathe more easily, you sometimes see animals you're hardly in the habit of seeing in the towns, you light a fire in the hearth, you play Scrabble or other party games. It has to be admitted that you often have more room there than in the town, and almost as much comfort, and sometimes as much peace and quiet. But none of this seems to me to be enough to base any pertinent difference on.

The country is a foreign land. It shouldn't be, yet it is. It might not have been so, but it has been so and will be so from now on. It's far too late to change anything.

I am a man of the towns; I was born, I grew up and I have lived in towns. My habits, my rhythms and my vocabulary are the habits, rhythms and vocabulary of a townsman. The town

belongs to me. I'm at home there: asphalt, concrete, railings, the network of streets, the dull grey of the façades stretching out of sight, these are things that may surprise or shock me, but in the same way that I might be surprised or shocked by, for example, the extreme difficulty we have when we want to look at the back of our own neck or the unjustifiable existence of the sinuses (frontal or maxillary). In the country, nothing shocks me; I might be conventional and say that everything surprises me; in actual fact, everything leaves me more or less indifferent. I learnt lots of things at school and I still know that Metz, Toul and Verdun constituted the Three Sees, that $\Delta = b^2 - 4ac$,* that acid plus base gives salt plus water, but I didn't learn anything about the country, or else I've forgotten everything I was taught. I've sometimes chanced to read in books that the country was populated by peasants, that peasants got up and went to bed with the sun, and that their work consisted, among other things, in liming, marling, rotating crops, manuring, harrowing, spudding, dressing, hoeing or treading out. For me, the operations concealed beneath these verbs are more exotic than those that preside, for example, over the servicing of a central heating boiler, an area in which I'm not all that well informed.

There are, of course, the great yellow fields furrowed by gleaming machines, the copses, the meadows planted with clover and vines as far as the eye can see. But I know nothing of these spaces, for me they are impracticable. The only things I can know are the little packets from Vilmorin or Truffaut,† the renovated farm-houses where the yokes of the oxen have become wall-hangings and grain measures have become waste-paper baskets (I have one, to which I'm very attached), compassionate articles about the raising of young calves and a nostalgia for cherries eaten sitting in the tree.

*The formula by which quadratic equations were taught in French schools.

†Vilmorin and Truffaut are well-known seed merchants in Paris.

2

Village utopia

For a start, you'd have been at school with the postman.

You'd know that the schoolmaster's honey is better than the station-master's (no, there wouldn't be a station-master any longer, only a level-crossing keeper; the trains haven't been stopping for several years now and a bus service has replaced them, but there would still be a level-crossing that hasn't yet been automated).

You'd know whether it was going to rain by looking at the shape of the clouds above the hill, you'd know the places where there are still crayfish, you'd remember the time when the garage-man shod horses (pile it on a bit, until you almost want to believe it, not too much though).

Of course, you'd know everyone and everyone's stories. Every Wednesday, the *charcutier* from Dampierre would toot in front of your house bringing you your andouillettes. Every Monday, Madame Blaise would come and wash.

You'd go with the children to pick blackberries along the sunken lanes; you'd go with them to the mushrooms; you'd send them off to hunt for snails.

You'd watch out for the 7 o'clock bus to come past. You'd like to go and sit on the village bench, underneath the hundred-year-old elm tree, opposite the church.

You'd go through the fields in ankle boots carrying a stick with a ferrule which you'd use to decapitate the long grasses.

You'd play cards with the gamekeeper.

You'd go and fetch your wood from the communal woodlands.

You'd be able to recognize birds by their song.

You'd know each one of the trees in your orchard.

You'd wait for the seasons to come round.

3

Nostalgic (and false) alternative:

To put down roots, to rediscover or fashion your roots, to carve the place that will be yours out of space, and build, plant, appropriate, millimetre by millimetre, your 'home': to belong completely in your village, knowing you're a true inhabitant of the Cévennes, or of Poitou.

Or else to own only the clothes you stand up in, to keep nothing, to live in hotels and change them frequently, and change towns, and change countries; to speak and read any one of four or five languages; to feel at home nowhere, but at ease almost everywhere.

Of Movement

We live somewhere: in a country, in a town in that country, in a neighbourhood in that town, in a street in that neighbourhood, in a building in that street, in an apartment in that building.

We should long ago have got into the habit of moving about, of moving about freely, without it being too much trouble. But we haven't done so, we've stayed where we were; things have stayed as they were. We haven't asked ourselves why it was there and not somewhere else, why it was like this and not otherwise. Then, obviously, it was too late, our habits were formed. We began to think we were well off where we were. After all, we were as well off there as over the road.

We have difficulty changing, even if it's only the position of our furniture. Moving house is quite a business. We stay in the same neighbourhood, we miss it if we change.

Something extremely serious needs to happen for us to agree to move: wars, famines, epidemics.

We find it hard to get acclimatized. Those who arrived a few days before you did look down on you. You stay in your own small corner, with the people from your corner. You remember with nostalgia your little village, your little river, the big field of mustard you could see when leaving the main road.

The Country

1

Frontiers

Countries are divided from one another by frontiers. Crossing a frontier is quite an emotive thing to do: an imaginary limit, made material by a wooden barrier which as it happens is never really on the line it purports to represent, but a few dozen or hundreds of metres this side or that of it, is enough to change everything, even the landscape. It's the same air, the same earth, but the road is no longer quite the same, the writing on the road signs changes, the baker's shops no longer look altogether like the thing we were calling a baker's shop just a short while earlier, the loaves are no longer the same shape, there are no longer the same cigarette packets lying around on the ground.

(Note what remains identical: the shape of the houses? the shape of the fields? the faces? the 'Shell' emblems at the filling stations, the 'Coca-Cola' signs that are almost identical, as a recent photographic exhibition showed, from Tierra del Fuego to Scandinavia and from Japan to Greenland, the rules of the road [with a few variations], the gauge on the railways [with the exception of Spain], etc.)

In 1952, in Jerusalem, I tried to set foot in Jordan, by getting underneath the barbed wire. I was stopped by the people I was with: it seems it had been mined. It wasn't Jordan I would have touched in any case, but a piece of nothing, of no man's land.

In October 1970, at Hof in Bavaria, I took in at a single glance, as they say, something that was West Germany, something that was East Germany and something that was Czechoslovakia. In the event, it was a vast grey, sullen expanse with a few clumps of trees. The – West German – inn from which you could take in this panorama was much frequented.

In May 1961, not far from the ruins of Sbeitla, in Tunisia, somewhere over towards Kasserine, I saw the frontier with Algeria: a simple row of barbed wire. A few hundred metres away, you could see a ruined farm that was in Algeria. The Morice Line, which was still in operation, passed just behind it, I was told.

Frontiers are lines. Millions of men are dead because of these lines. Thousands of men are dead because they didn't manage to cross them. Survival then depended simply on crossing a river, a small hill, a peaceful forest: on the far side was Switzerland, a neutral country, the Unoccupied Zone.

(*La Grande Illusion*: they didn't fire at escaped prisoners once they were over the frontier.)*

Tiny morsels of space have been fought over, bits of hillside, a few yards of seaside, needles of rock, the corner of a street. Death has come for millions of men from a slight difference in level between two points less than a hundred metres apart: they fought for weeks to capture or recapture Hill 532.

(One of the commanders-in-chief of the French Army in the 1914–18 war was called General Nivelle†.)

2

My country

The national territory (the Motherland – in German, *Vaterland* –, the Nation, the Country, France, the Hexagon) is a state in Western Europe corresponding in large part to Cisalpine Gaul. It is contained between $42^{\circ} 20'$ and $51^{\circ} 5'$ of latitude north, and between $7^{\circ} 11'$ of longitude west and $5^{\circ} 10'$ of longitude east. Its surface area is 528,576 square kilometres.

*The reference is to the celebrated Jean Renoir film.

†The sardonic point being that *niveler* is a French verb meaning 'to level off', making (*il*) *nivelle* the third person singular of the present tense.

For roughly 2,640 kilometres, this territory is bordered by a maritime space constituting French 'territorial waters'.

The entire surface area of the national territory is surmounted by an 'air space'.

The defence, integrity and security of these three spaces, terrestrial, maritime and aerial, are the object of constant concern on the part of the authorities.

I don't think I have anything special, or spatial, to add where my country is concerned.

Europe

One of the five parts of the world.

Old Continent

Europe, Asia and Africa.

New Continent

Hey guys, we've been discovered! (an Indian, catching sight of Christopher Columbus).

The World

The world is big.

Aeroplanes crisscross it at all times and in all directions.

Travelling.

You could set yourself to follow a given degree of latitude (Jules Verne, *The Children of Captain Grant*), or to pass through all the United States of America either in alphabetical order (Jules Verne, *The Testament of an Eccentric*) or by linking the passage from one state to the next to the existence of two towns of the same name (Michel Butor, *Mobile*).

The surprise and disappointment of travelling. The illusion of having overcome distance, of having erased time.

To be far away.

To see something *in reality* that had long been an image in an old dictionary: a geyser, a waterfall, the Bay of Naples, the spot where Gavrilo Princip was standing when he shot at Archduke Franz-Ferdinand of Austria and Duchess Sophia of Hohenberg, on the corner of Franz-Josef Street and the Appel Quay in Sarajevo, just opposite the Simic Brothers' bar on 28 June 1914, at 11.15 a.m.

Or else, rather, to see, far from its presumed place of origin, a perfectly ugly object, for example a box made out of seashells bearing the words 'Souvenir of Dinard' in a chalet in the Black Forest, or a perfectly commonplace one, such as a coathanger stamped 'Hôtel Saint-Vincent, Commercy' in a bed-and-breakfast in Inverness, or a perfectly improbable one, like the *Répertoire archéologique du Département du Tarn*, compiled by Mr H. Crozes, Paris, 1865, quarto, 123pp., in the sitting-room of a family pension

in Regensburg (better known in France under the name of Rat-
isbonne).

To see what you have always dreamed of seeing. But what have
you always dreamed of seeing? The Great Pyramids? The portrait
of Melancthon by Cranach? Marx's grave? Freud's grave? Bokhara
and Samarkand? The hat worn by Katharine Hepburn in *Sylvia
Scarlet*? (One day, on my way from Forbach to Metz, I made a
detour to go and see the birthplace of General Eblé in Saint-Jean-
Rohrbach.)

Or else, rather, to discover what you've never seen, what you didn't
expect, what you didn't imagine. But how to give examples? Not
what, over time, has come to be listed among the various wonders
and surprises of the world; neither the grandiose nor the impressive;
nor even the foreign necessarily. But rather the reverse, the familiar
rediscovered, a fraternal space . . .

What can we know of the world? What quantity of space can our
eyes hope to take in between our birth and our death? How many
square centimetres of Planet Earth will the soles of our shoes have
touched?

To cover the world, to cross it in every direction, will only ever
be to know a few square metres of it, a few acres, tiny incursions into
disembodied vestiges, small, incidental excitements, improbable
quests congealed in a mawkish haze a few details of which will
remain in our memory: out beyond the railway stations and the
roads, and the gleaming runways of airports, and the narrow strips
of land illuminated for a brief moment by an overnight express,
out beyond the panoramas too long anticipated and discovered too
late, and the accumulations of stones and the accumulations of
works of art, it will be three children perhaps running along a
bright white road, or else a small house on the way out of Avignon,
with a wooden lattice door once painted green, the silhouetted
outline of trees on top of a hill near Saarbrücken, four uproarious
fat men on the terrace of a café in the outskirts of Naples, the

main street of Brionne, in the Eure, two days before Christmas,
around six in the evening, the coolness of a covered gallery in the
souk at Sfax, a tiny dam across a Scottish loch, the hairpin bends
of a road near Corvol-l'Orgueilleux. And with these, the sense
of the world's concreteness, irreducible, immediate, tangible, of
something clear and closer to us: of the world, no longer as a
journey having constantly to be remade, not as a race without
end, a challenge having constantly to be met, not as the one pretext
for a despairing acquisitiveness, nor as the illusion of a conquest,
but as the rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that the earth
is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that
we ourselves are the authors.

... so that the world and space seemed to be the mirror one of the other both minutely storied in hieroglyphs and ideograms, and each of them could equally well be or not be a sign: a calcareous concretion on basalt, a ridge raised by the wind on the coagulated sand of the desert, the arrangement of the eyes in the feathers of the peacock (living in the midst of signs had very slowly brought us to see as so many signs the innumerable things that had at first been there without indicating anything but their own presence, it had transformed them into signs of themselves, and had added them to the series of signs deliberately made by whoever wanted to make a sign), the streaks of fire against a wall of schist, the four hundred and twenty-seventh groove — slightly askew — in the corniche on the pediment of a mausoleum, a sequence of streaks on a screen during a magnetic storm (the series of signs multiplied itself into the series of signs of signs, of signs repeated an innumerable number of times, always the same and always in some way different, for to the sign made on purpose was added the sign fallen there by chance), the badly inked downstroke of the letter R that in a copy of an evening paper had met with a flaw in the fibres of the newsprint, one scratch out of eight hundred thousand on the creosoted wall between two docks in Melbourne, the curve of a statistical graph, brakes being suddenly applied on tarmac, a chromosome ...

Italo Calvino, *Cosmicomics*

Space

We use our eyes for seeing. Our field of vision reveals a limited space, something vaguely circular, which ends very quickly to left and right, and doesn't extend very far up or down. If we squint, we can manage to see the end of our nose; if we raise our eyes, we can see there's an up, if we lower them, we can see there's a down. If we turn our head in one direction, then in another, we don't even manage to see completely everything there is around us; we have to twist our bodies round to see properly what was behind us.

Our gaze travels through space and gives us the illusion of relief and distance. That is how we construct space, with an up and a down, a left and a right, an in front and a behind, a near and a far.

When nothing arrests our gaze, it carries a very long way. But if it meets with nothing, it sees nothing, it sees only what it meets. Space is what arrests our gaze, what our sight stumbles over: the obstacle, bricks, an angle, a vanishing point. Space is when it makes an angle, when it stops, when we have to turn for it to start off again. There's nothing ectoplasmic about space; it has edges, it doesn't go off in all directions, it does all that needs to be done for railway lines to meet well short of infinity.

On Straight Lines

If I mend at this rate, it is not impossible ... but I may arrive hereafter at the excellency of going on even thus:

which is a line drawn as straight as I could draw it by a writing-master's ruler ...

This *right line*, – the path-way for Christians to walk in! say Divines, –
 – The emblem of moral rectitude! says Cicero, –
 – The *best line*! say cabbage planters, – is the shortest line, says Archimedes, which can be drawn from one given point to another.

Lawrence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

Measures

Like everyone else, I presume, I feel an attraction for zero points, for the axes and points of reference from which the positions and distances of any object in the universe can be determined:

- the Equator
- the Greenwich Meridian
- sea-level

or the circle on the parvis in front of Notre-Dame (it disappeared, alas, when they were making the carpark and no one has thought to put it back) from which all French distances by road were calculated.

When going from Tunis to Sfax, I used to like passing the sign (it, too, has since vanished) which showed how far it was to Tripoli, Benghazi, Alexandria and Cairo.

I like knowing that Pierre-François-André Méchain, born in Laon in 1744, and Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Delambre, born in Amiens in 1749, went from Dunkirk to Barcelona with the sole object of verifying how long a metre had to be (it seems that Méchain made a mistake in his calculations).

I like knowing that midway between the hamlets of Frapon and La Presle, in the commune of Vesdun, in the department of the Cher, a plaque is to be found indicating that you are at the exact *centre* of metropolitan France.

Right here, at this moment, it wouldn't be altogether impossible for me to determine my position in degrees, minutes, seconds, tenths and hundredths of a second: somewhere in the region of 49° north latitude, somewhere in the region of 2° 10' 14.4" east of Greenwich (or only a few fractions of a second west of the Paris meridian), and a few dozen metres above sea-level.

I read recently that a letter had been posted in England whose only address was a latitude and longitude. The sender, obviously, was, if not a geographer, then at least a surveyor or mapmaker, and it's true that the addressee lived on his own in a house sufficiently isolated to be identifiable. The fact remains that the letter arrived. The Postmaster-General, the British equivalent of our own Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, issued a statement in which he expressed the high esteem in which he held his postmen, but warned that in future such forms of address would not be accepted. The same goes for addresses written in verse; postmen have better things to do than solve riddles. The path a letter follows from its point of departure to its point of arrival is a strictly coded affair; Mallarmé, Latis* or cartography can only produce 'noise'.

Space seems to be either tamer or more inoffensive than time; we're forever meeting people who have watches, very seldom people who have compasses. We always need to know what time it is (who still knows how to deduce it from the position of the sun?) but we never ask ourselves where we are. We think we know: we are at home, at our office, in the Métro, in the street.

That of course is obvious – but then what isn't obvious? Now and again, however, we ought to ask ourselves where exactly we are, to take our bearings, not only concerning our state of mind, our everyday health, our ambitions, our beliefs and our *raisons d'être*, but simply concerning our topographical position, not so much in relation to the axes cited above, but rather in relation to a place or a person we are thinking about, or that we shall thus start thinking about. For example, when you get into the coach at the Invalides air terminal to go to Orly, picture the person you're going to meet passing directly above Grenoble, and try, as the coach makes its way with difficulty through the traffic jams in the Avenue de Maine, to imagine his slow progress across a map of France, crossing the Ain, the Saône-et-Loire, the Nièvre and the Loiret. Or else, more systematically, interrogate yourself at some precise moment of the day about the positions occupied

*The pseudonym of Emmanuel Peillet, a philosophy teacher and active member of OuLiPo.

by some of your friends, in relation both to one another and to yourself. List the differences in levels (the ones who, like you, live on the first floor, the ones who live on the fifth, the sixth, etc.), the direction they are facing, imagine their movements through space.

Long ago, like everyone else I presume, and no doubt on one of those little three-month diaries the Librairie Gibert gave away at the start of the autumn term, you went to swap the Carpentier-Fialap and Roux-Combaluzier textbooks of the year before for the Carpentier-Fialap and Roux-Combaluzier of the year ahead, I used to write my address as follows:

Georges Perec
18, Rue de l'Assomption
Staircase A
Third floor
Right-hand door
Paris 16e
Seine
France
Europe
The World
The Universe

playing with space

Play with large numbers (factorials, Fibonacci series, geometric progressions):

Distance from the Earth to the Moon: a sheet of cigarette paper so fine it would take a thousand of them to make a millimetre, folded in two 49 times in a row;

Distance from the Earth to the Sun: ditto, folded in two 58 times in a row;

Distance from Pluto to the Sun: the same again; by folding it four more times you're just about there, but fold it five more times and you pass Pluto by some 3,000,000,000 kilometres;

Distance from Earth to Alpha Centauri: fifteen more foldings.

Play with distances: prepare a journey that would enable you to visit or pass through all the places that are 314.60 kilometres from your house;

Look up the route you've followed on an atlas or army map.

Play with measurements: reacquaint yourself with feet and leagues (if only to make it easier to read Stendhal, Dumas or Jules Verne); try and get once and for all a clear idea of what a nautical mile is (and by the same token, a knot); remember that a *journal* is a unit of space, it's the surface area a farm labourer can work in a day.

Play with space:

Cause an eclipse of the sun by raising your little finger (as Leopold Bloom does in *Ulysses*).

Have yourself photographed holding up the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Start to get used to living in a state of weightlessness; forget verticals and horizontals: Escher's engravings, the inside of spaceships in 2001: *A Space Odyssey*.

Reflect on these two quite brilliant thoughts (complementary as it happens):

I often think about how much beef it would take to turn the Lake of Geneva into consommé. (Pierre Dac, *L'Os à moelle*)

Elephants are generally drawn smaller than life size, but a flea always larger. (Jonathan Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*)

the conquest of space

1

M. Raymond Roussel's Mobile Home(Extract from the *Revue du Touring Club de France*)

The author of *Impressions of Africa*, whose genius has been extolled by so many distinguished minds, has had an automobile 9 metres long by 2.30 wide built to his own design.

This vehicle is a veritable small house. Thanks to the ingenuity of its arrangement, it contains: a sitting-room, a bedroom, a studio, a bathroom, and even a small dormitory for a staff consisting of three men (two chauffeurs and a manservant).

The very elegant coachwork is by Lacoste and its interior layout is as original as it is ingenious . . . In the daytime the bedroom turns into a studio or sitting-room; in the evening the front section (behind the driver's seat) becomes a small bedroom in which the three men referred to above can relax and perform their toilet (there is a wash-basin in the casing to the left of the driver's seat and steering wheel).

The interior decoration of M. Raymond Roussel's mobile home bears the signature of Maple's.

It is heated electrically and has a petroleum gas-stove with flue. The water-heater likewise works off petroleum gas.

The fittings have been planned to meet all requirements. They even include a Fichet safe.

An excellent wireless set enables one to pick up all the European stations.

This description, brief though it is, is enough to show that this veritable mobile villa – to which a kitchen-trailer can be added – allows its owner to rediscover all the comforts of the family home within an only slightly reduced setting.

This luxurious installation is mounted on a Saurer chassis. On the flat, its normal speed is some 40 kilometres an hour. The steepest descents can be tackled without fear thanks to the motor braking system.

The steering has an excellent 'lock', something much to be desired when taking the hairpin bends on mountain roads.

. . . As soon as it was built, the caravan left . . . to effect a 3,000-kilometre

excursion through Switzerland and Alsace. M. Roussel was able to enjoy a fresh horizon each evening.

He has brought back incomparable impressions from his journey.

2

Saint Jerome in his Study

by Antonello da Messina (National Gallery, London)

The study is a piece of wooden furniture standing on the tiled floor of a cathedral. It rests on a dais which is reached by three steps and consists mainly of six compartments filled with books and various other objects (boxes chiefly and a vase), and a working surface the flat part of which supports two books, an inkwell and a quill, and the sloping part the book that the saint is in the midst of reading. All its elements are fixed, i.e. constitute the piece of furniture as such, but on the dais also are a chair, the one on which the saint is sitting, and a chest.

The saint has taken his shoes off in order to mount the dais. He has put his cardinal's hat down on the chest. He is dressed in a (cardinal) red robe and wears a sort of skullcap, also red, on his head. He sits very upright on his chair, and a long way from the book he is reading. His fingers have slipped inside the pages as if he were either only leafing through the book, or rather as if he had a frequent need to refer back to passages he has read earlier. On top of one of the shelves, facing the saint and high above him, there stands a tiny crucifix.

On one side of the shelves are fixed two austere hooks, one of which bears an item of clothing that may be an amice or a stole, but is more likely a towel.

On a projection of the dais are two potted plants, one of which might be a dwarf orange-tree, and a small tabby cat whose position gives one to suppose it is dozing. Above the orange-tree, on the panel of the worktop, a label is fixed, as nearly always with Antonello da Messina, giving the artist's name and the date when the picture was painted.

On either side and above the study, you can get an idea of the rest

of the cathedral. It is empty, with the exception of a lion, on the right, which, with one paw raised, seems to be hesitating whether to come and disturb the saint at his work. Seven birds are framed in the tall, narrow upper windows. Through the lower windows can be seen a countryside of low hills, a cypress tree, olive trees, a castle, a river with two people in a boat and three fishermen.

The whole is seen from a vast ogival opening on the sill of which a peacock and a very young bird of prey are obligingly perched next to a magnificent copper basin.

The whole space is organized around *the piece of furniture* (and the whole of the piece of furniture is organized around the book). The glacial architecture of the church (the bareness of the tiling, the hostility of the piers) has been cancelled out. Its perspectives and its vertical lines have ceased to delimit the site simply of an ineffable faith; they are there solely to lend scale to the piece of furniture, to enable it to be *inscribed*; Surrounded by the uninhabitable, the study defines a domesticated space inhabited with serenity by cats, books and men.

3

The Escaped Prisoner

'Thus you think you can see a bridge galloping'

Jacques Roubaud

I've forgotten where this anecdote came from, I can't guarantee its authenticity and I'm far from being certain as to the accuracy of its terminology. Nevertheless, it seems to me to illustrate my purpose admirably.

A French prisoner of war succeeded in escaping in the middle of the night from the train that was taking him to Germany. The night was pitch black. The prisoner was wholly ignorant of his whereabouts. He walked for a long time at random, i.e. straight ahead. At a certain moment he came to the banks of a river. There was the moan of a siren. A few seconds later, the waves raised by the passing boat came and broke on the bank. From the time

separating the moan of the siren from the splashing of the waves, the escapee deduced the width of the river. Knowing how wide it was, he identified it (it was the Rhine) and having identified it, knew where he was.

4

Meetings

It would be quite senseless obviously if it were otherwise. Everything has been studied, been worked out, there's no question of getting it wrong, no known case of an error being detected, even of a few centimetres, even of a few millimetres.

Yet I still feel something like amazement when I think of the French and Italian workmen meeting in the middle of the Mont Cenis tunnel.

The Uninhabitable

The uninhabitable: seas used as a dump, coastlines bristling with barbed wire, earth bare of vegetation, mass graves, piles of carcasses, boggy rivers, towns that smell bad

The uninhabitable: the architecture of contempt or display, the vainglorious mediocrity of tower blocks, thousands of rabbit hutches piled one above the other, the cutprize ostentation of company headquarters

The uninhabitable: the skimped, the airless, the small, the mean, the shrunken, the very precisely calculated

The uninhabitable: the confined, the out-of-bounds, the encaged, the bolted, walls jagged with broken glass, judas windows, reinforced doors

The uninhabitable: shanty towns, townships

The hostile, the grey, the anonymous, the ugly, the corridors of the Métro, public baths, hangars, car parks, marshalling yards, ticket windows, hotel bedrooms

factories, barracks, prisons, asylums, old people's homes, lycées, law courts, school playgrounds

space-saving private properties, converted attics, superb bachelor pads, fashionable studio flats in leafy surroundings, elegant pieds-à-terre, triple reception rooms, vast homes in the sky, unbeatable view, double aspect, trees, beams, character, luxurious designer conversion, balcony, telephone, sunlight, hallway, real fireplace, loggia, double (stainless steel) sink, peace and quiet, exclusive small garden, exceptional value

You are asked to give your name after 10 p.m.

Embellishment:

39533/43/Kam/J

6 November 1943

Objective: to assemble the plants for the purpose of providing a border of greenery for the camp's Nos 1 and 2 crematorium ovens. Ref: Conversation between SS-Obersturmbannführer Höss, Camp Commandant, and Sturmbannführer Bishoff.

To SS-Sturmbannführer Ceasar, Head of Agricultural Services in the Concentration Camp of Auschwitz (Upper Silesia).

In conformity with an order from SS-Obersturmbannführer Höss, Camp Commandant, Nos 1 and 2 crematorium ovens in the camp will be provided with a green border serving as a natural boundary to the camp.

The following is a list of the plants needing to be drawn from our stocks of trees:

200 trees in leaf from three to five metres high; 100 tree shoots in leaf from a metre and a half to four metres high; lastly, 1,000 bushes for use as lining from one to two and a half metres high, all to come from the stocks in our nurseries.

You are requested to place these supplies of plants at our disposal. Head of the Central Building Directorate of the Waffen SS and the Police at Auschwitz.

Signed: SS-Obersturmführer
(quoted by David Rousset, *Le Pitre ne rit pas*, 1948)

Space (Continuation and End)

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin:

My birthplace, the cradle of my family, the house where I may have been born, the tree I may have seen grow (that my father may have planted the day I was born), the attic of my childhood filled with intact memories . . .

Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.

My spaces are fragile: time is going to wear them away, to destroy them. Nothing will any longer resemble what was, my memories will betray me, oblivion will infiltrate my memory, I shall look at a few old yellowing photographs with broken edges without recognizing them. The words '*Phone directory available within*' or '*Snacks served at any hour*' will no longer be written up in a semi-circle in white porcelain letters on the window of the little café in the Rue Coquillière.

Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds:

To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs.

PARIS 1973-1974

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Since 1984, small planet No 2817 (1982 UJ) has borne the name of Georges Perec