

from *L'Infra-ordinaire* (1989)

*Approaches to What?**

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist. Aeroplanes achieve existence only when they are hijacked. The one and only destiny of motor-cars is to drive into plane trees. Fifty-two weekends a year, fifty-two casualty lists: so many dead and all the better for the news media if the figures keep on going up! Behind the event there has to be a scandal, a fissure, a danger, as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal: natural cataclysms or historical upheavals, social unrest, political scandals.

In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory, let's not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible. What is scandalous isn't the pit explosion, it's working in coalmines. 'Social problems' aren't 'a matter of concern' when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, tower-blocks that collapse, forest fires, tunnels that cave in, the Drugstore des Champs-Élysées burns down. Awful! Terrible! Monstrous! Scandalous! But where's the scandal? The true scandal? Has the newspaper told us anything except: not to worry, as you can see life exists, with its ups and its downs, things happen, as you can see.

The daily papers talk of everything except the daily. The papers annoy me, they teach me nothing. What they recount doesn't concern me, doesn't ask me questions and doesn't answer the questions I ask or would like to ask.

What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all

*First published in *Cause Commune* in February 1973.

the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?

To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren't the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it's anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?

How are we to speak of these 'common things', how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.

What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we've been pillaging from others. Not the exotic any more, but the endotic.

To question what seems so much a matter of course that we've forgotten its origins. To rediscover something of the astonishment that Jules Verne or his readers may have felt faced with an apparatus capable of reproducing and transporting sounds. For that astonishment existed, along with thousands of others, and it's they which have moulded us.

What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why?

Describe your street. Describe another street. Compare.

Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out.

Question your tea spoons.

What is there under your wallpaper?

How many movements does it take to dial a phone number? Why?

Why don't you find cigarettes in grocery stores? Why not?

It matters little to me that these questions should be fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project. It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that's exactly what makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we've tried in vain to lay hold on our truth.

One overcast weekend in October 1974, Georges Perec set out in quest of the "infraordinary": the humdrum, the nonevent, the everyday—"what happens," as he put it, "when nothing happens." His choice of locale was Place Saint-Sulpice where, ensconced behind first one café window, then another, he spent three days recording everything to pass through his field of vision: the people walking by; the buses and driving-school cars caught in their routes; the pigeons moving suddenly en masse, as if in accordance to some mysterious command; the wedding (and then funeral) at the church in the center of the square; the signs, symbols, and slogans littering everything; and the darkness that eventually absorbs it all. In *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, Perec compiled a melancholic, slightly eerie, and oddly touching document in which existence boils down to rhythm, writing turns into time, and the line between the empirical and the surreal grows surprisingly thin.



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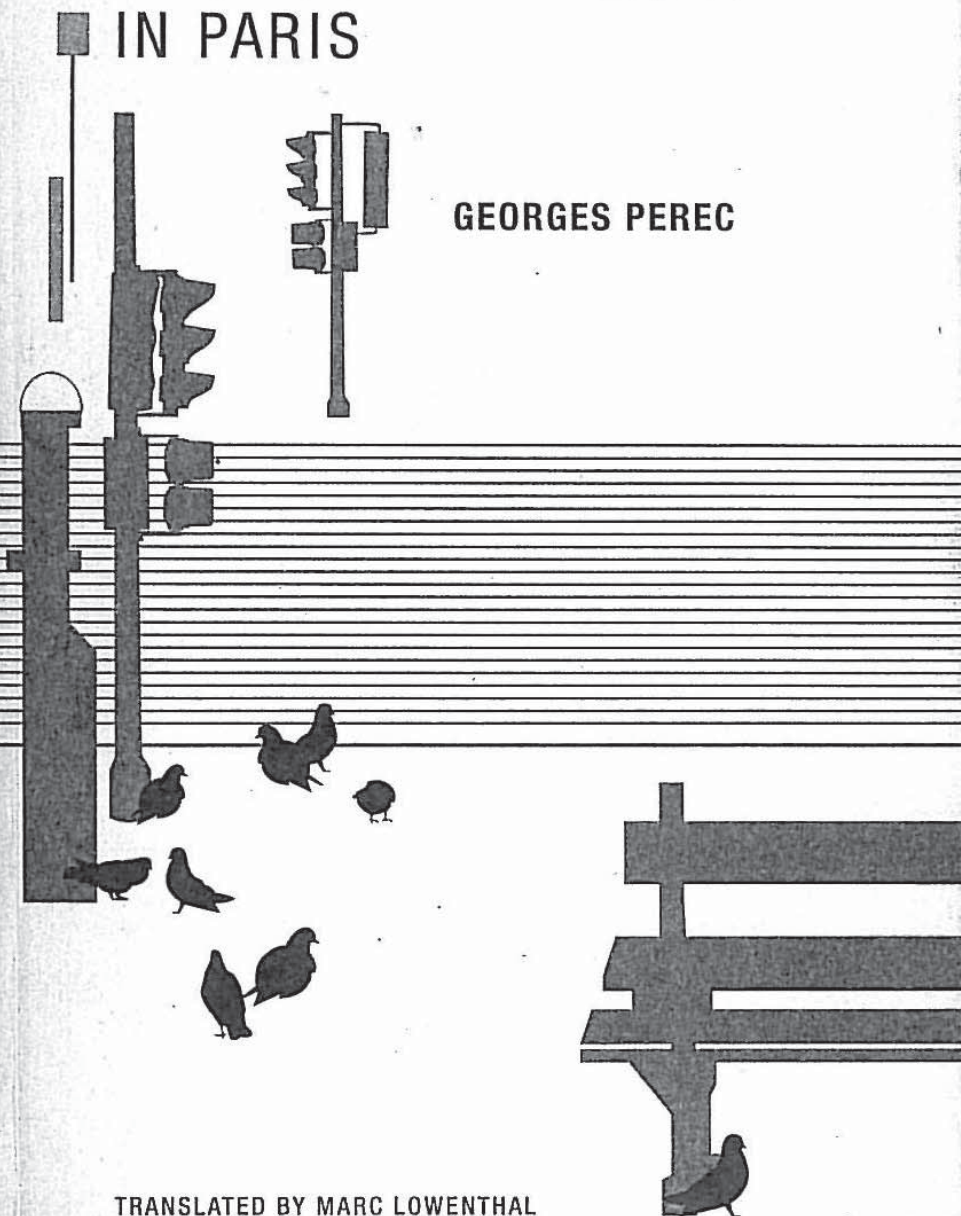
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AN ATTEMPT AT EXHAUSTING A PLACE IN PARIS

GEORGES PEREC



TRANSLATED BY MARC LOWENTHAL

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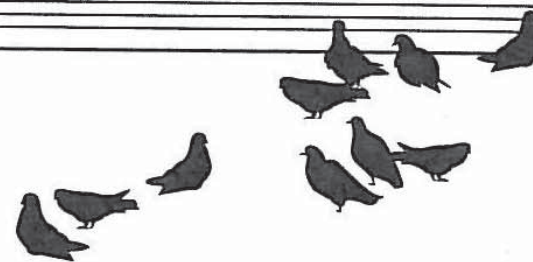
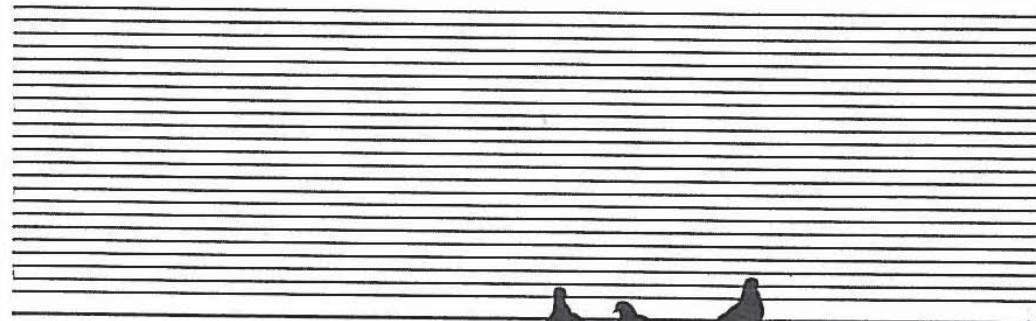
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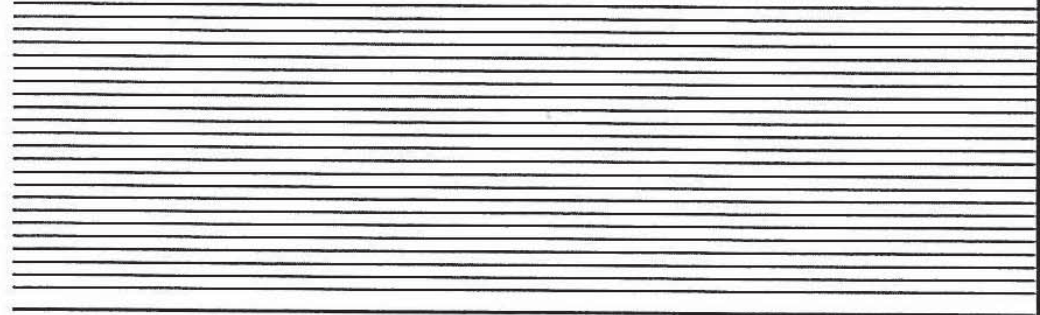
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The translator would like to thank David Bellos and Judy Feldmann for their input on this translation, and for making it better than it would otherwise have been; and Margarita Encomienda for putting it into such a handsome visual package.

Any faults to be found with this translation remain that of the translator.

AN ATTEMPT AT
EXHAUSTING A PLACE
IN PARIS

There are many things in place Saint-Sulpice; for instance: a district council building, a financial building, a police station, three cafés, one of which sells tobacco and stamps, a movie theater, a church on which Le Vau, Gittard, Oppenord, Servandoni, and Chalgrin have all worked, and which is dedicated to a chaplain of Clotaire II, who was bishop of Bourges from 624 to 644 and whom we celebrate on 17 January, a publisher, a funeral parlor, a travel agency, a bus stop, a tailor, a hotel, a fountain decorated with the statues of four great Christian orators (Bossuet, Fénelon, Fléchier, and Massillon), a newsstand, a seller of pious objects, a parking lot, a beauty parlor, and many other things as well.

A great number, if not the majority, of these things have been described, inventoried, photographed, talked about, or registered. My intention in the pages that follow was to describe the rest instead: that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds.

DAY

1

1

DATE: 18 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 10:30 AM

LOCATION: TABAC SAINT-SULPICE

WEATHER: DRY COLD. GRAY SKY. SOME SUNNY SPELLS.

Outline of an inventory of some strictly visible things:

- Letters of the alphabet, words: "KLM" (on the breast pocket of someone walking by), an uppercase "P" which stands for "parking"; "Hôtel Récamier," "St-Raphaël," "l'épargne à la dérive [Savings adrift]," "Taxis tête de station [Taxi stand]," "Rue du Vieux-Colombier," "Brasserie-bar La Fontaine Saint-Sulpice," "P ELF," "Parc Saint-Sulpice."
- Conventional symbols: arrows, under the "P" of the parking lot signs, one of them pointing slightly toward the ground, the other in the direction of rue Bonaparte (Luxembourg side), at least four one-way signs (a fifth one reflected in one of the café mirrors).
- Numbers: 86 (on the front of a bus on the 86 line, above which it says its destination: Saint-Germain-des-Prés), 1 (plaque of no. 1 on rue du Vieux-Colombier), 6 (on the square, indicating that we are in the sixth arrondissement of Paris).
- Fleeting slogans: "De l'autobus, je regarde Paris [From the bus, I look at Paris]"
- Ground: packed gravel and sand.

- Stone: the curbs, a fountain, a church, buildings...
- Asphalt
- Trees (leafy, many yellowing)
- A rather big chunk of sky (maybe one-sixth of my field of vision)
- A cloud of pigeons that suddenly swoops down on the central plaza, between the church and fountain
- Vehicles (their inventory remains to be made)
- Human beings
- Some sort of basset hound
- Bread (baguette)
- Lettuce (curly endive?) partially emerging from a shopping bag

Trajectories

- The 96 goes to Montparnasse station
- The 84 goes to Porte de Champerret
- The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF
- The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

Demand the real thing, Roquefort Société in its green oval

There's no water gushing from the fountain. Some pigeons are sitting on the edge of one of its basins. There are benches on the plaza, double benches with a single headboard. From where I'm sitting I can

count six of them. Four are empty. Three down-and-outs making classic gestures (drinking red wine from a bottle) on the sixth.

The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette

The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

Cleaning is good, not making a mess is better

A German bus

A Brinks truck

The 87 goes to Champ-de-Mars

The 84 goes to Porte Champerret

Colors

red (Fiat, dress, St-Raphaël, one-ways)

blue bag

green shoes

green raincoat

blue taxi

blue 2CV

The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF

green Mehari

The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

Dannon: Yogurts and desserts

Demand the real thing, Roquefort Société in its green oval

Most people are using at least one hand: they're holding a bag, a briefcase, a shopping bag, a cane, a leash with a dog at the end, a child's hand

A truck delivers beer in metal casks (Kanterbraü, beer of Maître Kanter)

The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette

A double-decker "Cityrama" bus

A blue Mercedes truck

A brown Printemps Brummell truck

The 84 goes to Porte de Champerret

The 87 goes to Champ-de-Mars

The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF

The 96 goes to Gare Montparnasse

Darty Real

The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette

Casimir master caterer. Charpentier Transport.

Berth France S.A.R.L.

Le Goff draft beer

The 96 goes to Gare Montparnasse

Driving school

Coming from rue du Vieux-Colombier, an 84 turns onto rue Bonaparte (toward Luxembourg)

Walon Moving

Fernand Carrascossa Moving

Wholesale potatoes

From a tourist bus, a Japanese woman seems to be taking my photograph.

An old man with his half-baguette, a lady with a cake-box in the shape of a little pyramid

The 86 goes to Saint-Mandé (it doesn't turn onto rue Bonaparte, but takes rue du Vieux-Colombier)

The 63 goes to Porte de la Muette

The 87 goes to Champ-de-Mars

The 70 goes to Place du Dr Hayem, Maison de l'ORTF

Coming from rue du Vieux-Colombier, an 84 turns onto rue Bonaparte (toward Luxembourg)

A bus, empty.

Some Japanese, in another bus

The 86 goes to Saint-Germain-des-Près

Braun art reproductions

Lull (lassitude?)

Pause.

An 86 passes by. An 87 passes by. A 63 passes by
People stumble. Micro-accidents.
A 96 passes by. A 70 passes by.
It is twenty after one.
Return (uncertain) of previously seen individuals:
a young boy in a navy blue peacoat holding a plastic
bag in his hand passes by the café again
An 86 passes by. An 86 passes by. A 63 passes by.
The café is full
On the plaza a child is taking his dog for a run (looks
like Snowy)
Right by the café, at the foot of the window and at three
different spots, a fairly young man draws a sort of "V"
on the sidewalk with chalk, with a kind of question
mark inside it (land art?)
A 63 passes by
Six sewer workers (hard hats and high boots) take rue
des Canettes.
Two free taxis at the taxi stand
An 87 passes by
A blind man coming from rue des Canettes passes by
in front of the café; he's a young man, with a rather
confident way of walking.
An 86 passes by
 Two men with pipes and black satchels
 A man with a black satchel and no pipe

A woman in a wool jacket, smiling
 A 96
 Another 96
(high heels: bent ankles)
 An apple-green 2CV
 A 63
 A 70

It is 1:35 PM. Groups, in gusts. A 63. The apple-green
2CV is now parked almost at the corner of rue Férou,
on the other side of the square. A 70. An 87. An 86.
Three taxis at the taxi stand. A 96. A 63. A bike courier.
Deliverymen delivering beverages. An 86. A little girl
with a schoolbag on her shoulders.

Wholesale potatoes. A lady taking three children to
school (two of them have long red hats with pom-poms)
There is an undertaker's van in front of the church.
A 96 goes by.
People are gathering in front of the church (for a funeral
procession?)
An 87. A 70. A 63.
Rue Bonaparte, a cement mixer, orange.
A basset hound. A man with a bow tie. An 86.
The wind is making the leaves on the trees move.
A 70.

It is one fifty.
SNCF parcels service.
The people from the funeral procession have entered
the church
Passage of a driving-school car, a 96, a 63, a florist's van,
blue, which parks next to the undertaker's van and from
which a funeral wreath is taken.
In splendid unity, the pigeons go round the square and
return to settle on the district council building's gutter.
There are five taxis at the taxi stand.
An 87 goes by, a 63 goes by.
The Saint-Sulpice bell begins to ring (probably funeral
chimes)
Three children taken to school. Another apple-green
2CV.
Again the pigeons go round the square
A 96 passes by, stops before the bus stop (Saint-Sulpice
section); off it steps Geneviève Serreau, who takes
rue des Canettes; I get her attention by knocking on the
windowpane, and she comes over to say hello.
A 70 passes by.
The funeral chimes stop.
A young girl is eating half a *palmier*.
A man with a pipe and black satchel.
A 70 passes by
A 63 passes by

It is five after two.
An 87 passes by.
People, in waves, still, continually
A priest returning from a trip (there is an airline label
hanging from his satchel).
A child slides a toy car along the windowpane of the café
(slight noise)
A man stops for a moment to say hello to the big dog
of the café, peacefully stretched out in front of the door
An 86 passes by
A 63 passes by
A woman passes by. On her bag is written "Gudule"
Almost in front of the café, a man squats down to
rummage through his briefcase
An 86 passes by
A young man passes by; he is carrying a large portfolio
There are only two mopeds still parked on the sidewalk
in front of the café now: I didn't see the third one leave
(it was a *velosolex*) (*Obvious limits to such an undertaking:
even when my only goal is just to observe, I don't see
what takes place a few meters from me: I don't notice,
for example, that cars are parking*)
A man passes by: he is pulling a handcart, red.
A 70 passes by.
A man looks at the Laffont window
In front of "La Demeure" a woman is waiting, standing
near a bench

In the middle of the street, a man is on the lookout for taxis (there are no more taxis at the taxi stand)

An 86 passes by. A 96 passes by. A "Tony-gency!" deliveryman passes by.

Malissard Dubernay rapid transit passes by.

Again the pigeons go round the square. What triggers off this unified movement? It doesn't seem linked to any exterior stimulus (explosion, detonation, change in light, rain, etc.) nor to any particular motivation; it seems completely gratuitous: the birds suddenly take flight, go round the square and return to settle on the district council building's gutter.

It is two twenty.

A 96. Elegant women. A lost Japanese man, then another, smiling, ask a passerby for directions. He points them to rue des Canettes and they immediately head for it.

Passage of a 63, an 87, and a "Dunod éditeur" van.

Near the bus stop, a woman puts stamps on three letters and drops them into a mailbox.

Small poodle-type dog.

A sort of double of Peter Sellers, with a very pleased expression on his face, walks by the café. Then a woman with two very young children. Then a group of 14 women coming from rue des Canettes.

I have the impression that the square is almost empty (but there are at least twenty human beings in my line of sight).

A 63.

A postal van.

A child with a dog

A man with a newspaper

A man with a large "A" on his sweater

A "Que sais-je?" truck: "La collection 'Que sais-je' a réponse à tout [The 'Que sais-je' collection has an answer for everything]"

A spaniel?

A 70

A 96

Funeral wreaths are being brought out of the church.

It is two thirty.

A 63, an 87, an 86, another 86, and a 96 go by.

An old woman shades her eyes with her hand to make out the number of the bus that's coming (I can infer from her disappointed look that she's waiting for the 70)

They're bringing out the casket. The funeral chimes start ringing again.

The hearse leaves, followed by a 204 and a green Mehari.

An 87

A 63

The funeral chimes stop

A 96

It is a quarter after three.

Pause.

DATE: 18 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 3:20 PM

LOCATION: LA FONTAINE SAINT-SULPICE (CAFÉ)

Later on, I went to the Tabac Saint-Sulpice. I went up to the second floor, a sad room, rather cold, occupied only by a quintet of bridge players, four of whom were in the middle of playing three clubs. I went back down and installed myself at the table I had occupied this morning. I ate a pair of sausages and drank a glass of Bourgueil.

I again saw buses, taxis, cars, tourist buses, trucks and vans, bikes, mopeds, Vespas, motorcycles, a postal delivery tricycle, a motorcycle-school vehicle, a driving-school car, elegant women, aging beaus, old couples, groups of children, people with bags, satchels, suitcases, dogs, pipes, umbrellas, potbellies, old skins, old schmucks, young schmucks, idlers, deliverymen, scowlers, wind-bags. I also saw Jean-Paul Aron, and the proprietor of the "Trois canettes" restaurant, whom I had already seen this morning.

I am now at La Fontaine St-Sulpice, sitting with my back to the square: the cars and people in my line of sight are coming from the square or are getting ready to cross it (with the exception of some pedestrians coming from rue Bonaparte).

Several grannies wearing gloves pushed some baby carriages

They're preparing for the National Day for the Elderly. An 83-year-old woman came in, presented her collection box to the café owner, but left again without holding it out to us.

On the sidewalk, there is a man shaken, but not yet ravaged, by tics (movements of the shoulder as if he were experiencing a continual itching in the neck); he holds his cigarette the same way I do (between the middle finger and the ring finger): it's the first time I've come across someone else with this habit.

Paris-Vision: a double-decker bus, not very full.

It is five after four. Weary eyes. Weary words.

An apple-green 2CV

(I'm cold; I order a brandy)

Across the street, at the tabac, the bridge players from the second floor are getting some air

A motorcycle cop parks his motorcycle and enters the tabac; he comes back out almost immediately, I don't know what he bought (cigarettes? a ballpoint pen, a stamp, cachous, a packet of tissues?)

Cityrama bus

A motorcycle cop. An apple-green Citroën van.

The urgent sounds of a car horn are audible.

A granny pushing a baby carriage; she's wearing a cape

A mailman with his satchel

A racing bike attached to the back of a low car

A postal delivery tricycle, a postal van (is it time for the mailboxes to be emptied?)

There are people who read while walking, not a lot, but a few.

A green Mehari

A baby in a baby carriage lets out a brief squawking. It looks like a bird: blue eyes, fixed, profoundly interested by what they take in.

A meter man with a bad cough puts a parking ticket on a green Morris

A man wearing a Russian astrakhan fur hat. Then another.

A little boy wearing an English school cap; he crosses, making sure that he steps only on the stripes of the crosswalk.

A mailman with satchel

Two meter maid-to-orders

Two dogs, brothers, Snowy types

A man in a beret, looks like a priest

A woman in a shawl

A granny with baby carriage

A man in a Russian fur hat (it's the same one, he's come back)

A priest in a beret (another one)

Capes, turbans, boots, sailor-like cap, short or long scarves, policeman with kepi, furs, suitcases, umbrellas

A bike courier

An English couple (they enter the café and chat in their idiom): his coat is as long as he is

A girl with short braids wolfing down a baba (is it a baba? it looks like a baba)

A woman with a baguette. Another one.

It is a quarter to five. I want to clear my head. To read *Le Monde*. Take my business elsewhere.

Pause.

DATE: 18 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 5:10 PM

LOCATION: CAFÉ DE LA MAIRIE

The newspaper kiosk was closed; I didn't find *Le Monde*;
I took a short walk (rue des Canettes, rue du Four,
rue Bonaparte): idle beauties swarming into the fashion
shops. On rue Bonaparte I looked at the titles of some
books on sale, some store windows (antique and modern
furniture, used books, drawings and engravings)

It's cold, increasingly so it seems to me

I am sitting in the Café de la Mairie, a little toward the
back in relation to the terrace

An 86 goes by, empty

A 70 goes by, full

Jean-Paul Aron goes by, again: he coughs

A group of children are playing ball in front of the church

A 70 goes by, nearly empty

A 63 goes by, almost full

(why count the buses? probably because they're recogniz-
able and regular: they cut up time, they punctuate
the background noise; ultimately, they're foreseeable)

The rest seems random, improbable, anarchic; the buses
pass by because they have to pass by, but nothing requires
a car to back up, or a man to have a bag marked with a

big "M" of Monoprix, or a car to be blue or apple-green,
or a customer to order a coffee instead of a beer...)

A 96 goes by, almost empty

The "P" of the parking lot and its arrow light up.
Luminous globes are now visible along the floors of
the financial building

A 70 goes by, full

A 63 goes by, much less so

The motorcycles and the mopeds turn on their headlights

Car signals become visible, as do the taxi lights, brighter
when they're free

An 86 goes by, almost full

A 63 goes by, almost empty

A 96 goes by, nearly full

An 87 goes by, nearly full

(Apply the law of communicating vessels to
the buses...)

It is 5:50

A red and blue cement mixer, a Pyrénées taxi transport.

A 96 goes by, full

An 86 goes by, absolutely empty (only the driver)

A 63 goes by, almost empty

A daddy goes by pushing a stroller

Alterations in daylight

A somewhat empty 87, a half-full 86

The children are playing under the pillars of the church.

A beautiful white dog with black spots

A light in a building (is it the hôtel Récamier?)

An almost empty 96

Wind

A full 63, an almost full 70, an almost full 63

A man enters the café, plants himself in front of a customer who immediately gets up and goes to pay for his drink; but he doesn't have change and the other one pays. They leave together.

A man wants to enter the café; but he tries pulling the door instead of pushing it

Ghostliness

A full 70 goes by

(fatigue)

A half-full 96 goes by

New lights turn on in the café. Outside the dusk is at its height

A 63 goes by, full

A man goes by, pushing his Solex

A 70 goes by, full

A half-full 96 goes by

Extra-fresh eggs NB goes by

It is five to six

A man took out a dolly from a blue van, loaded it with different cleaning products, and pushed it down rue des Canettes. Outside you can barely even make out the faces anymore

Colors blend: a grayness that is rarely lit.

Yellow patches. Reddish glows.

An almost empty 96 goes by

A police car goes by and turns in front of the church square

An empty 86 and a moderately full 87 go by

The bells of Saint-Sulpice begin to ring

A full 70, an empty 96, another 96, even emptier

Open umbrellas

Motor vehicles turn on their headlights

A barely filled 96, a full 63

The wind seems to be blowing in gusts, but not many cars have turned on their windshield wipers

The bells of Saint-Sulpice have stopped ringing (was it vespers?)

An almost empty 63 goes by

Night, winter: unreal appearance of the passersby

A man carrying carpets

Lots of people, lots of shadows, an empty 63; the ground is gleaming, a full 70, it seems to be raining harder.

It is ten after six. Car horns; the start of a traffic jam

I can barely see the church; on the other hand, I see almost the entire café (and myself writing) reflected in its own windowpanes

The traffic jam has broken up

The headlights alone indicate that cars are passing

The street lamps progressively light up

Way in the distance (hôtel Récamier?) there are now several lit windows

An 87 goes by, almost full

A man carrying a crate goes by

A man carrying a plank goes by

A police car goes by, its blue light spinning

An empty 87, a full 70, an empty 87 go by

People running

A man goes by carrying an architect's model (is it really an architect's model? it resembles my idea of an architect's model; I don't see how it could be anything else).

An orange cement mixer, an almost empty 86, a full 70, an empty 86 go by

Indistinct shadows

A full 96

(perhaps I have only today discovered my true calling: ticket collector for the Paris City Transport Authority)

It is 6:45 PM.

Autos go by

A yellow postal van stops in front of the mailbox, which a postal worker relieves of its dual contents (Paris/Out of Town, including suburbs)

It's still raining

I'm drinking a Salers Gential.

DAY ②

5

DATE: 19 OCTOBER 1974 (SATURDAY)

TIME: 10:45 AM

LOCATION: TABAC SAINT-SULPICE

WEATHER: FINE RAIN, DRIZZLE

Passage of a street sweeper cleaning out the gutters
What has changed here since yesterday? At first sight, it's really the same. Is the sky perhaps cloudier? It would really be subjective to say that there are, for example, fewer people or fewer cars. There are no birds to be seen. There is a dog on the plaza. Over the hôtel Récamier (far behind it?) a crane stands out in the sky (it was there yesterday, but I don't recall making note of it). I couldn't say whether the people I'm seeing are the same ones as yesterday, whether the cars are the same ones as yesterday. On the other hand, if the birds (pigeons) came (and why wouldn't they come) I'd feel sure they would be the same birds.

Many things have not changed, have apparently not budged (the letters, the symbols, the fountain, the plaza, the benches, the church, etc.); I myself am sitting at the same table.

Buses pass by. I've lost all interest in them.

The Café de la Mairie is closed. The newsstand too (it won't open until Monday)

(I think I saw Duvignaud passing by, heading toward the parking lot)

An ambulance goes by, siren blaring, then a tow truck
towing a blue DS.

Several women are pulling wheeled shopping bags

The pigeons arrive; there seem to be fewer of them than
yesterday

Influx of human or automotive crowds. Lulls.

Alternations.

Two "Parisian Coach" type of buses with platforms pass
by with their cargoes of photophagous Japanese

A Cityrama bus (of Germans? Japanese?)

The rain stopped very suddenly; there was even a vague
ray of sun for several seconds.

It is a quarter past 11

In search of a difference

The Café de la Mairie is closed (I don't see it; I know
this because I saw it coming off the bus)

I'm drinking a Vittel water, whereas yesterday I was
drinking a coffee (how does that transform the
square?)

Did the Fontaine St-Sulpice special of the day change
(it was fresh cod yesterday)? Probably, but I'm too
far away to make out what's written on the slate
where it's announced.

(Two buses of tourists, the second is called "Walz Reisen");
might the tourists today be the same ones as the
tourists yesterday (does a man who goes round Paris
on a Friday want to do so again on a Saturday?)?

Yesterday, there was a metro ticket on the sidewalk, right
in front of my window; today there is, not exactly
in the same spot, a candy wrapper (cellophane) and
a piece of paper difficult to identify (a little bigger
than a "Parisiennes" wrapper but a much lighter blue).

A little girl goes by wearing a long red hat with a pom-pom
(I already saw her yesterday, but yesterday there were
two of them); her mother is wearing a long skirt made of
strips of fabric sewn together (not really patchwork)

A pigeon is perched on top of a streetlight

People are entering the church (to visit it? Is it time
for mass?)

A stroller who looks a little like Michel Mohrt passes by
the café again and seems surprised to see me still sitting
at the table in front of a Vittel and sheets of paper

A bus: "Percival Tours"

Other people are entering the church

The tourist buses adopt different strategies: all come
from Luxembourg by rue Bonaparte; some continue
along rue Bonaparte; others turn onto rue du Vieux-
Colombier: this difference doesn't always correspond
to the nationality of the tourists.

"Wehner Reisen" bus

Cop car

Pause

DATE: 19 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 12:30 PM

LOCATION: ON A BENCH RIGHT IN THE SUN, AMONG THE PIGEONS,
LOOKING IN THE DIRECTION OF THE FOUNTAIN
(SOUNDS OF TRAFFIC BEHIND)

WEATHER: THE SKY IS SUDDENLY CLEAR.

The pigeons are almost immobile. It is difficult to count them, though (200, maybe); some are asleep, feet tucked up. It's time for their cleaning (with their beaks, they comb through their crops or their wings); some are perched on the rim of the third basin of the fountain. People are coming out of the church.

I sometimes hear car horns. The traffic is what one would call fluid.

There are four of us on four benches. A cloud hides the sun for a moment. Two tourists take a photograph of the fountain.

A double-decker Paris-Vision bus goes by

Pigeons are washing themselves in the fountain (the basins are full of water, but the lions' mouths aren't spurting out any water); they splash around and come out all ruffled.

The pigeons at my feet have a fixed stare. So do the people looking at them.

The sun is hidden. There's some wind.

DATE: 19 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 2:00 PM

LOCATION: TABAC SAINT-SULPICE

Passage of Paul Virilio: he's going to see *The Lousy Gatsby* at the Bonaparte.

I've been sitting here, without writing, for forty-five minutes; I ate a sausage sandwich and drank a glass of Bourgueil. Then coffees. Next to me half a dozen clothing merchants chatter, satisfied with their small business. With a menacing eye I watch the birds, people, and vehicles pass by.

The café is packed

A distant acquaintance (friend of a friend, friend of a friend of a friend) passed by in the street, came over to say hello, had a coffee.

A Paris-Vision bus goes by. The tourists have headphones

The sky is gray. Fleeting sunny spells.

Weary vision: obsessive fear of apple-green 2CVs.

Unsatisfied curiosity (what I came here to find, the memory floating in this café...)

What difference is there between a driver who parks on the first go and another ("90") who only manages to do so after several minutes of laborious efforts? This provokes attention, irony, the participation of an audience: to see not just the rips, but the fabric (but how to see

the fabric if it is only the rips that make it visible: no one ever sees buses pass by unless they're waiting for one, or unless they're waiting for someone to come off of one, or unless the Paris City Transport Authority pays them a salary to count them...)

Also: why are two nuns more interesting than two other passersby?

A man goes by, wearing a surgical collar

A woman goes by; she is eating a slice of tart

A couple approaches their Autobianchi Abarth parked along the sidewalk. The woman bites into a tartlet.

There are lots of children.

A man who has just parked his car (in the Autobianchi's spot) looks at it as if he doesn't recognize it.

A blue car, a yellow one, two blue 2CVs

There is only one taxi at the taxi stand. The driver has opened his trunk.

The pigeons take a trip round the square

The café is almost empty

A young girl goes by; she is carrying a tennis racket under her arm (in a fabric cover in which one can also keep the balls)

An apple-green 2CV

A folding stroller

A wheeled shopping bag

A group of boy scouts with knapsacks enter the church

A lady who has bought a long pole goes by

A driving school goes by

In a purely abstract manner, one could propose the following theorem: during the same lapse of time, more individuals walk in the Saint-Sulpice / rue de Rennes direction than in the rue de Rennes / Saint-Sulpice direction.

Several women in shades of green.

The scouts leave Saint-Sulpice in single file.

One of them who came over here to use the telephone runs back to rejoin them; he climbs the stairs of the church and comes back down them four by four, carrying his knapsack and the patrol's flag (I do have a good view)

Policeman no. 5976 comes and goes along rue du Vieux-Colombier. He bears a certain resemblance to Michael Lonsdale.

The "Coches parisiens"

The man with the surgical collar (just a moment ago he was on rue du Vieux-Colombier, now he is on rue Bonaparte)

Preceded by 91 motorcycles, the mikado passes by in an apple-green Rolls Royce

Cityrama: a Japanese woman absorbed in her headphones

I hear: "it's a quarter after three"

A man in a raincoat makes big gestures

Some Japanese on a bus
The bells of Saint-Sulpice begin to ring (this would be,
I believe, a baptism)
The birds make a trip round the square
The two meter maids from yesterday pass by again; they
seem worried today.
A bit of liveliness in the café, in the street
A man who has just bought a pack of Winstons and
a pack of Gitanes tears off the crystal (cellophane)
envelope of the pack of Winstons
Slight change in the light
Some Japanese on a bus; they don't have headphones;
the attendant is Japanese
All the pigeons settle on the plaza.
The lights turn red (they do this often)
Scouts (same ones) pass by the church again
An apple-green 2CV with a l'Eure-et-Loir registration
number (28)
A bus. Japanese.
Gathering of some individuals in front of Saint-Sulpice.
I can make out a man at the top of the steps, sweeping
(is it the beadle?). I know there is going to be a wedding
(from two customers who just, in fact, went over to
attend it).
A little girl, flanked by her parents (or by her kidnappers)
is weeping

A bus (Globus) three-quarters empty
A lady who has just bought an ugly candleholder goes by
A small bus goes by: Club Reisen Keller
Bus. Japanese.
I'm cold. I order a brandy
A car goes by, its hood covered in dead leaves
A motorcyclist goes by, pushing a very new red
Yamaha 125
For the umpteenth time the 79 rue de Rennes
auto-driving school car goes by
A little girl with a blue balloon goes by
For the second time a meter maid in slacks goes by
Beginnings of a traffic jam in rue Bonaparte
Lots of people, lots of cars
A man goes by, eating a cake (the reputation of the
neighborhood confectioners is not to be doubted)
A bus: Paris-Sud buses: are they tourists?
The bells of Saint-Sulpice begin ringing, maybe for the
wedding. The big doors of the church are open.
Paris-Vision bus
The bridal procession enters the church
Traffic jam in rue du Vieux-Colombier
The buses are at a virtual standstill on the square
Fourth passage of Michel Mohrt's distant double
Distant flight of pigeons.

A purple cape, a red 2CV, a cyclist.

The bells of Saint-Sulpice stop ringing

In the distance, two men are running.

A police car slows down to a dead stop: the force of inertia makes the side door close, which a hand reopens and keeps open.

The café is full.

A jam-packed bus goes by, but no Japanese.

The light is beginning to fade, even if this is still barely noticeable; the red of the stoplights is increasingly visible.

Lights come on in the café.

Two buses, Cityrama and Paris-Vision, are unable to get by each other. The Cityrama eventually takes rue Bonaparte, the Paris-Vision would like to take rue du Vieux-Colombier. Policeman no. 5976 ("Michel Lonsdale"), at first confused, eventually grabs his whistle and intervenes—effectively, in fact.

A man walks by with his nose in the air, followed by another man who is looking at the ground.

A man with a can of Ripolin goes by
people people cars

An old lady with a very beautiful Sherlock Holmes-style waterproof fitted coat

The crowd is dense, almost no more lulls

A woman with two baguettes under her arm

It is four thirty

DAY

3

8

DATE: 20 OCTOBER 1974 (SUNDAY)

TIME: 11:30 AM

LOCATION: CAFÉ DE LA MAIRIE

WEATHER: RAIN. WET GROUND. PASSING SUNNY SPELLS.

For long intervals, no buses, no cars

The end of mass

The rain starts falling again.

National Day for the Elderly: lots of people are wearing little paper badges on the collars of their coats or their raincoats: these prove that they've already contributed

A 63 goes by

A lady carrying a cake-box goes by (classic image of the exitings of Sunday mass effectively testified here)

Some children

Some wheeled shopping bags

A 2CV whose windshield is adorned with a caduceus, driven by an elderly gentleman, parks at the edge of the sidewalk; the elderly gentleman comes to look for an elderly lady in the café who is drinking a coffee while reading *Le Monde*

An elegant woman goes by, holding, stems up, a large bouquet of flowers.

A 63 goes by

A little girl goes by, carrying two large bags of groceries

A bird settles atop a lamppost

It is noon

Gust of wind

A 63 goes by

A 96 goes by

An apple-green 2CV goes by

The rain gets fierce. A lady makes a hat with a plastic bag marked "Nicolas"

Umbrellas sweep into the church

Moments of emptiness

Passage of a 63 bus

Geneviève Serreau passes by in front of the café (too far away for me to get her attention)

Project: a classification of umbrellas according to their forms, their means of functioning, their color, their material...

Some green emerges from a shopping bag

A 96 goes by

Differences stand out: there are fewer buses, there are few or even no trucks or delivery vans, the cars are most often private; more people seem to be entering or leaving Saint-Sulpice.

More differences would be due to the rain, which is not necessarily specific to its being Sunday.

A dog runs past, tail in the air, sniffing the ground.

Gestures and movements are made difficult by the rain (carrying a cake-box, pulling a wheeled shopping bag, walking while holding a child by the hand).

Passage of a 63

The church square is almost empty. Then three people cross it.

Then three groups of two. Then a solitary man who comes out of the church.

It is still raining, but maybe a little less heavily.

A man supporting an old lady crosses the church square very slowly

An apple-green car (RL?)

A 96 bus

A grayish car whose back right door is blue.

It is twelve thirty.

At the corner of the church and rue Saint-Sulpice, a man tools up before unlocking his moped, which he has chained to the bars of some sort of basement window (it's really too large to be a basement window)

Meanwhile, the rain has stopped

The wind dispels the rain that had accumulated on the café awning: waves of water

Pigeons on the plaza. A Volkswagen goes by between the plaza and the church square. The church square is empty

Two passersby in the distance. Slight sunny spell.

Full shopping bags: celery, carrots

Bouquets of flowers held with stems up

Most of the cake-boxes are in parallelepiped form
(tarts?); pyramids are rare.

A 63

A bag (Tunisian) on which "SOUVENIR" is written.

A 96

I'm eating a Camembert sandwich

It is twenty to one.

9

DATE: 20 OCTOBER 1974

TIME: 1:05 PM

LOCATION: CAFÉ DE LA MAIRIE

For quite a while now (half an hour?) a cop has been standing, without moving, reading something, on the curb of the plaza, between the church and the fountain, his back to the church.

A taxi two mopeds a fiat a car whose make I don't know

A man running

Sunny spell. No car. Then five. Then one.

Oranges in a string bag.

Michel Martens, with a geranium umbrella

The 63

The 96

A health service ambulance (Paris hospitals)

A ray of sunlight. Wind. A yellow car in the distance

A police car. Some cars. An Atlas Reisen car

A man with his left arm in a cast

A 63, which stops in this particular instance at the corner of rue des Canettes to let a couple of elderly people get off

A green-colored DS taxi

A yellow car (the same one) emerges from rue Saint-

Sulpice and drives over the part of the church square
meant for motor vehicles

There is a tree just opposite the café: a piece of string is
tied around the trunk of the tree.

In the distance, near rue Férou, the yellow car parks

The church square is completely empty: it is 1:25.

The policeman is still pacing up and down the curb of
the plaza, sometimes coming up to the corner of rue
Saint-Sulpice or moving off to just about right in front
of the financial building.

The 96

By looking at only a single detail, for example rue Férou,
and for a sufficiently long period of time (one to two
minutes), one can, without any difficulty, imagine that
one is in Étampes or in Bourges, or even, moreover,
in some part of Vienna (Austria) where I've never been.

Watched, or rather, excited by its master, a black dog
frisks about the plaza.

Barking

A young father goes by, carrying his sleeping baby on his
back (and an umbrella in his hand)

The church square would be empty if the cop weren't
pacing up and down it

The 63

The 96

In the distance, two boys in red anoraks

A dark blue Volkswagen crosses the church square
(I've seen it before)

Rarity of complete lulls: there is always a passerby in the
distance, or a car passing by

The 96

Tourists are photographing each other in front of
the church

The church square is empty. A tourist bus (Peters Reisen),
empty, crosses it

The 63

It is five to two

The pigeons are on the plaza. They all fly off at the
same time.

Four children. A dog. A little ray of sun. The 96. It is
two o'clock

TRANSLATOR'S AFTERWORD

Clinical in appearance, and seemingly (deceptively) cursory in import, Georges Perec's *Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* is in fact a cornerstone to his oeuvre. It bears obvious allegiance to his socio-logically influenced writings on space of this time—most overtly to *Species of Spaces* (commissioned by Paul Virilio, who makes an inadvertent guest appearance in the present text), which had just come out in book form the month before he was undertaking this *Attempt*. But although it would be two more years (and one week) before Perec would set down the first words of his magnum opus, *Life A User's Manual*, this *Attempt* can also be read as a prelude to that novel, even as an inverted version of it—something like a *Life*, without the manual. Some of the oppositions between the two works are obvious: the fifty-odd pages of this volume, for instance, make for an obvious contrast to the almost six hundred denser pages of *Life*. But its very conception is at the antipodes to *Life*: whereas the later novel would present a roving eye investigating every nook and cranny within the delineated confines of an imaginary Parisian apartment building frozen in time (8:00 exactly on 23 June 1975—some eight months after the recordings of this text), Perec here lets the contents of an actual Parisian square rove about his, for the most part, stationary eye. Time, unarrestable, works against his project, though, and he is diverted from his observations by an effort to observe what has specifically changed in his field of view from one day to the next; seemingly nothing, but then again, yes... what will, in fact, eventually become everything. Every bus that passes, every person who walks by, every object, thing, and event—everything that happens and that does not happen ultimately serves no

other function than that of so many chronometers, so many signals, methods, and clues for marking time, for eroding permanence.

It is almost in what it doesn't say that this short text, this noble exercise in futility, conveys such a sense of melancholy. "If in this world there is one misery having no relief, it is the pressure on the heart from the *incommunicable*," Thomas de Quincey once wrote, describing the unhappy echo behind every effort to write and speak, and behind every decision not to. The attempt to communicate everything, to describe everything—to *exhaust* everything—is always a sympathetic effort, however doomed to failure it may be. What always remains after such an effort, what remains uncommunicated, is misery.

In introducing his anthology of heteroclitic authors (madmen, naïfs, and would-be scientists falling significantly outside any imaginable canon), Raymond Queneau had summed up an argument in anticipation of criticism for his devoting so much attention to such an understandably neglected crowd of authors: "one must see everything." Perec echoed this sentiment repeatedly throughout his work: his very first novel, *Things*, pointedly opens with an anonymous eye gliding over an apartment's furnishings; the devastating account of a young man's death-in-life experience in *A Man Asleep* opens with an equally pointed closing of an anonymous pair of eyes; and Perec would subsequently open *Life* with an epigraph from Jules Verne: "Look with all your eyes, look."

Both men shared a certain impossible desire for totality: if Queneau, true to his Hegelian roots, indeed made an impressive attempt at *reading* everything, Perec's legacy lies more in the effort he made in seeing and *taking note* of everything; if Queneau attempted to attain the status of absolute reader, Perec attempted to attain the status of absolute writer.

Queneau was in many ways Perec's literary mentor: it was his death that pushed Perec finally to start writing *Life A User's Manual*,

and his dedication of that book to Queneau comprises not only the first words one reads when opening that novel, but also the first words Perec had set down when writing it. His *Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* evokes Queneau in a number of ways. One may recall the café waiter Alfred in *The Last Days*, watching everyone and everything pass through their preordained cycles, all in accordance to the universe's machinations that he alone has charted; or the repugnant Mme Cloche on the watch from her café seat in *The Bark Tree* (reprinted as *Witch Grass*), hoping to see a pedestrian get run over by a car and disrupt the Parisian square's patterns. Or one may think of all the Parisian buses that mark time throughout Perec's *Attempt* the way Valentin Bru's broom sweeps attempt to eradicate it in *The Sunday of Life*—particularly the buses, given that Queneau had known all of the Paris bus lines, and often rode them simply for the pleasure of riding them (it is a banal incident on a bus, repeated 99 times, that he chose for the narrative essence of his *Exercises in Style*).

Whereas Queneau elaborated on a distinctive metaphysical banality throughout his novels, *Attempt* was one of Perec's clearer efforts to grapple with what he termed the "infraordinary": the markings and manifestations of the everyday that consistently escape our attention as they compose the essence of our lives—"what happens," as he puts it here, "when nothing happens." Whether it was by recording, composing, or transforming these substrata of experience, Perec utilized the infraordinary throughout the majority of his books. But it is in his shorter works and essays—particularly those collected posthumously in *L'infra-ordinaire* such as "Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four"—that Perec presents it in its rawest form. The extreme literary empiricism of this particular *Attempt* is a particularly clear example, and it is striking to note how its sustained tone of excessive reality

tends to blur into shades of unreality. Focused empirical attention on what we take for granted can have disquieting effects; one thinks of Descartes in the midst of his meditations, staring out of his window and finding himself unable to determine whether the winter coats walking along the sidewalk are worn by humans or by automatons; or David Hume sitting uneasily in his study, isolated in his realization that there is nothing to assure him that the footsteps he hears on the stairs outside his room actually belong to a pair of walking feet. Even the Surrealists recognized this potency of the everyday: a particularly clear precedent for Perec's project here may well be Salvador Dalí's 1929 Paris "Documentaries," a series of reports in which he recorded everything to pass through his field of vision.¹

Another interesting quality of Perec's "infraordinary" is the fact that it tends to be made not so much of primary materials, but of a more elusive substance, difficult to translate: the word "Gudule" on a shopping bag, a *palmier* being consumed by a child, the "Que sais-je" series of educational books. One could find equivalents in American culture, but to do so would be to write another book, one that attempted to exhaust a re-created "place." An American sitting in the same cafés that Perec haunts in this short work, moreover, would undoubtedly take note of very different details of his or her surroundings. Reading through Perec's *Attempt* makes one realize the degree to which our perception of the world is formulated through categories, genres, and classifications, many of them specific to the cultures we come from.² What remains outside these categories, going by this *Attempt*, seems to be sparse indeed. For all we know, these are in fact automatons walking about the place Saint-Sulpice—the items everyone holds in their hands seem almost to have more presence than the people holding them.

For all its simplicity, or even because of it, Perec's brief *Attempt* will evoke any number of texts. I think of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," Adolfo Bioy Casares's *The Invention of Morel*, the

rhythmic pigeons in Jacques Roubaud's *Some Thing Black*, the overheard café conversations of Guillaume Apollinaire's "Lundi rue Christine," Situationist exercises in psychogeography, or Daniel Spoerri's collaborative exercise in the everyday, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. Even more obvious comparisons would be Olivier Rolin's not-yet-translated *L'Invention du monde* (his attempted account of everything that took place throughout the world on 21 March 1989) or Harry Mathews's *The Journalist* (a novel depicting a mental and narrative breakdown brought on by an overly focused attention on the details of the everyday). But to each reader his or her own associations. The aim of this afterword is merely to find the right words for framing this little book and avoid any unnecessary verbiage, to avoid cluttering up what continues to be an increasingly cluttered world: of information, of lives, of deaths. One must balance a writerly love of detail with the obsessive-compulsive relief in knowing that everything will eventually vanish—a relief matched by the dread evoked by the very idea of such a thing happening. One then conjures up an ideal library, the abstraction of an archive somewhere, preserving these unhappy thoughts, preserving written words, witnessed sights, preserving everything and awaiting an impossible reader.

I remember the idea once occurring to me as a child that perhaps my actions would be viewed in the future, preserved in light, preserved in an illuminated archive projected light-years away from Earth: a comforting notion as one walks home on an autumn day, realizing another year is about to slip by—even a pleasing idea when shoring up those moments of love or heroism that can provide a modicum of pleasure and pride; and an unsettling concept when engaged in one of those many less-than-noble activities that compose the essence of our less-than-extraordinary lives.

Perec's text is open ended enough to allow readers to bring in whatever baggage they wish, and to leave with anything they wish—from a cellophane wrapper on the pavement to an unseizable,

overflowing world—and this translator could easily be accused of overlooking Perec's characteristic spots of humor peeking through his notations (not unlike those fleeting rays of sun poking through the dreary weather that plagues the text), or the almost meditative emptying out of affect that seems finally to transpire in the text's last hour. I am, however, writing this afterword in Amsterdam, by a lamp in a hotel room, unable to sleep. The sun is just barely beginning to rise, just beginning to cover this particular part of the Earth like a prolonged and sleepy flash: a sun that I imagine to be storing all of our images, all of this city's multifaceted images, in the archives of outer space. And perhaps this feeble lamp, which has made the recording of these words possible, perhaps this insomniac's gleam has also managed to preserve in some way, despite my room's drawn curtains, this particular sad night. Why this idea that light never completely fades? There is, after all, no fabular archive, and our words and sights will indeed all disappear; but at this moment—already long dead—it seems possible to look upon this very fading less as an end than as a form of conversion.

The emulsion of the Earth: the emulsion coating Amsterdam, coating Paris, and coating a certain square, where behind first one café window, then another, Georges Perec is chipping patiently away at time, second by dying second.

Notes

1. See *Oui: The Paranoid-Critical Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1998). Dalí's field of vision was much more restricted than Perec's is here—a restaurant tabletop, a square foot of ground by a bench in a park—and thus on an empirical level, makes for an arguably (going by Perec's own guiding rules) more “successful” series of endeavors.
2. This cultural resistance to translation is more obvious in what may be Perec's most untranslatable book, *Je me souviens* (I remember), a collection of brief remembrances of things and people that are indecipherable to anyone not French and not of his generation.