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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.

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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 . . .

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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 corresponding 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

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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 .

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 equipages. 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.

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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*