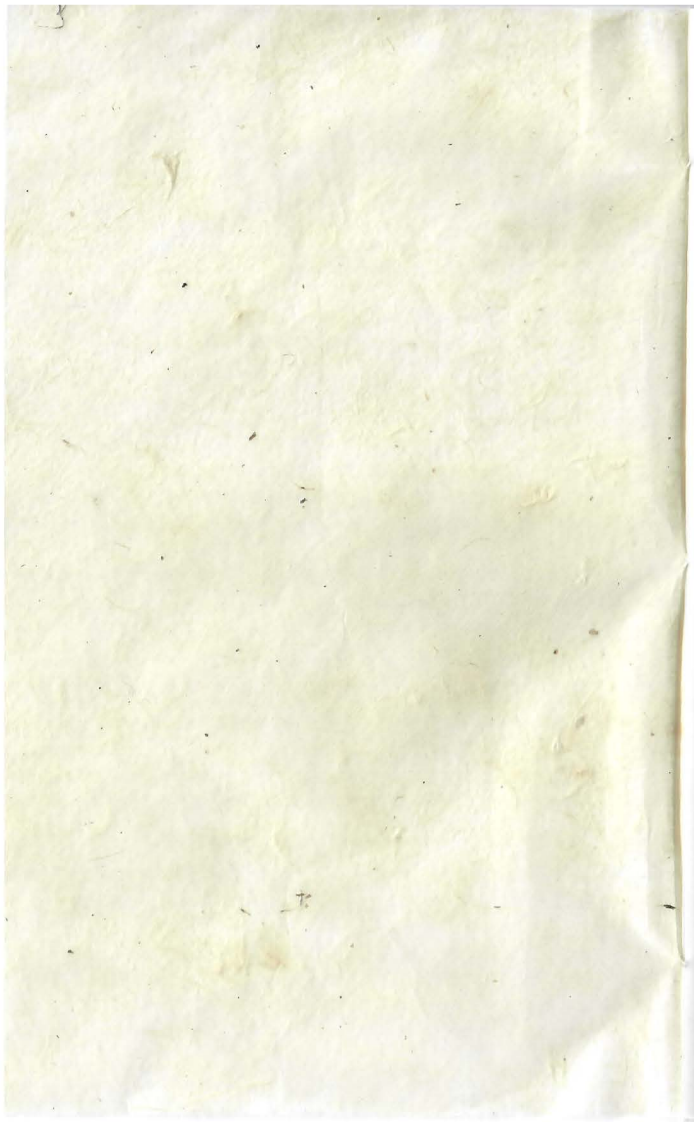

Positions through Essaying

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 buildi[illegible] 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, [illegible] roadway [illegible] 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 [illegible] are equipped with specific amenities [illegible] 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

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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

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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

*Called 'boats' because of their shape.

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

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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.

Much Irish history has been lost. The 1922 Fire destroyed thousands of documents; only fragments of history survived. The history of Ireland is a palimpsest: altered, whilst still bearing visible traces of its earlier form. Palimpsest underpins the project, borne from a desire to understand the layers of history embedded within the built environment. Much Irish history has been lost, not erased . . .

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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.

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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 . . .

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.

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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.

I am merely the collector,
the archivist, An Chartlannaí.

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
– and rear door is locked;

– You are the curator;
the interpreter:
An Ateangaire.
raises the handle inside
slams the door
checks it's locked securely

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

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Beauty of the women.
The fashion is for heels that are too high.

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- 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

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– 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.

THE PALIMPSEST ARCHIVE
The Stone Cottage

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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.

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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 lacustrian 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 cafe, 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)

You are invited to view
this archive
as an act of participatory palimpsest.
The story of The Stone Cottage is permutable.

Mise, le meas,
An Chartlannaí

5
Places
(Notes on a work in progress)

This essay follows the sequence, tempo, and form of Georges Perec's 'Species of Spaces'. The Palimpsest Archive reflects Perec's threefold method of recording ageing. Place, memory and writing are used as lenses for observation. These themes prescribe the system used to initially catalogue the material within The Stone Cottage Archive. Users are invited to view and engage with the documents using the combined knowledge of 20 historical sources. The excerpts do not intersect. Each source, a thread, unwinds the layered history of The Stone Cottage. When used, the documents become unbound. Disorder is not confusion, and participation does not result in completion. One, of many narratives, has been told.

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An Ateangaire,

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

Once the sleeves are broken, the documents are unbound. You are free to layer and relayer as you deem fit. The way you reorder the archival documents will change the narrative of the story.

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

Piece together and pull apart.

date, sometimes the place, sometimes the time, I pretend to be
writing a letter

Place, memory and writing will become indiscernible.

Do not fret when the documents become disentangled; this is a necessary process to disentangle the history.

You are invited to view
this archive
as an act of participatory palimpsest.
The story of The Stone Cottage is permutable.

Mise, le meas,
An Chartlannaí

5
Places
(Notes on a work in progress)

This essay follows the sequence, tempo, and form of Georges Perec's 'Species of Spaces'. The Palimpsest Archive reflects Perec's threefold method of recording ageing. Place, memory and writing are used as lenses for observation. These themes prescribe the system used to initially catalogue the material within The Palimpsest Archive. The documents are created using the combined knowledge of 26 historical sources. The excerpts act as a dataset. Each source, a thread, untwines the layered history of The Stone Cottage. When used, the documents become unbound. Disorder is not confusion, and participation does not result in completion. One, of many narratives, has been told.

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,

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 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 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.

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