

Eternal Tableaux

Space, Time and Georges Perec

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How are we to inhabit
This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staying as we are,
In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet
Unrealized projects, and a strict sense
Of time running out, of evening presenting
The tactfully folded-over bill?

-John Ashbery, (1977)

These lines from Ashbery's "Pyrography" could well bear the laments of Georges Perec's myriad characters. The French author's all-to-short literary career was marked by three emerging themes: puzzles and tricks (1), detailed description, and space. In his 1974 essay *Species of Spaces (Espèces d'espaces)*, Perec cites a statement by French playwright Jean Tardieu: "Granted there is a wall, what's going on behind it?" (SS 39). The author dedicates his literary career to answering Tardieu's question. Stripping away the outer wall of his characters' habitats, Perec treats his readers to a magic lantern show of everyday life.

Perec's most concentrated attempt at "breaking down an outer wall" is his novel *Life a User's Manual (La Vie mode d'emploi)*. In this monumental work, Perec "imagine[s] a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed" (SS 40)—ie: a "space from which a fourth wall is missing"—allowing him to "[describe] the rooms thus unveiled and the activities unfolding in them" (SS 40). Perec gives a preview of this "project" in *Species of Spaces*—hinting at the narrative's unique structure (2) and citing one of his inspirations, a drawing by Saul Steinberg that appeared in *The Art of Living* in 1952. This drawing:

shows a rooming-house (you can tell it's a rooming-house because next to the door there is a notice bearing the words No Vacancy) part of the façade of which had been removed, allowing you to see the interior of some twenty-three rooms (SS 41).

Experimenting with the meticulous cataloguing that was to mark his later works, Perec goes on to describe the rooms' contents (3) and the frozen-in-time actions of their inhabitants (4). Despite the detailed description he gives us of Steinberg's apartment building, Perec is chagrined at his failure to reproduce the space in total: "the mere inventory—and it could never be exhaustive—of the items of furniture and the actions represented has something truly vertiginous about it" (SS 41). This same frustration with his inability to depict the infinite possibilities of space pops up again when Perec describes the back room of Madame Marcia's antique shop in *Life a User's Manual*:

The back room is dark and narrow, with a lino floor, and cluttered to the point of inextricability with objects of every shape and size. The jumble is such that an exhaustive list of contents is impossible, and we shall have to be satisfied with a description of pieces protruding from this heteroclite heap with a degree of visibility (LU 103).

The reader gets the impression that Perec would have been happier attempting to create such an exhaustive list. However, his *own* instruction manual—the rules, constraints and structures he used for creating the text—do not allow him, the omniscient author, to enter a room, move furniture about, open locked chests and unroll old scrolls. Such would be the equivalent of sinking one's hand into a fish tank or interrupting a play mid-scene to move set pieces and switch props about. Meddling in the lives of his characters and manipulating their possessions is contrary to Perec's narrative style. Objects, people and pets stay in one place from beginnings to ends of chapters and sometimes, as in *Life a User's Manual*—for entire novels, lending Perec's written work the static visual feel of a drawing such as Steinberg's. This stationary glimpse of life is sufficient inspiration for

Perc's bizarre and enthralling tales—he demonstrates his knack by spontaneously improvising one based on Steinberg's picture, “fancy[ing] it is summertime. It must be something like eight o'clock in the evening...The owner of the building is no doubt the woman who is knitting...she has fallen on hard times...” (SS 43).

In *The Poetics of Experiment*, Warren F. Motte, Jr. juxtaposes the traditional subjugation of description to narration as characterized by Gérard Genette in “Frontières du récit” (“La description est tout naturellement *ancilla narrationis*, esclave toujours nécessaire, mais toujours soumise, jamais émancipée...”) with Perc's exceptional take on the description/narration relationship: “It becomes increasingly difficult to determine the boundaries of any descriptive morceau in Perc; more problematic still is the question of distinguishing between narration and description” (Motte 68). Indeed, narration of performative action only takes up about half of *Life A User's Manual's* 500 odd pages. Perc uses the remainder to adroitly strip the exterior wall off a 23rd of June, 1975, eight o'clock in the evening apartment building and proclaim ala Jules Verne in *Michael Strogoff*: “Look with all your eyes, look.”

Predictably, the effect is similar to looking at a dollhouse or a diorama. In fact, when Perc actually does describe a dollhouse of Madame Moreau's in Chapter 23, we forget (and may not even realize) his subject matter's diminutive nature:

typical English cottage...[with] 1 drawing room with bay windows (2 lancets), thermometer affixed, 1 sitting room, 4 bedrooms, 2 servants' rooms, tiled kitchen with close range and scullery, lounge hall fitted with linen wallpresses...fumed oak sectional bookcase containing the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *the New Century Dictionary*, transverse obsolete medieval and oriental weapons, dinner gong, alabaster lamp, bowl pendant, vulcanite automatic telephone receiver with adjacent directory, hand-tufted Axminster carpet with cream ground and trellis border, loo table with pillar-and-claw legs, hearth with massive firebrasses and ormolu mantel chronometer clock, guaranteed timekeeper with cathedral chime, barometer with hygrographic chart, comfortable lounge settees and corner fitments, upholstered in ruby plush with good springing and sunk center... (LU 99)

A miniature copy of a 1782 printing of Hayden's "Symphony in D" completes Perec's extensive list of the furnishings and decorations of a "three feet high, two feet nine inches wide, and two feet deep" doll's house. Perec's description of this remarkable artifact does not differ from his accounts of the rest of the room it occupies, or, indeed the remainder of the building. The reader must conclude that Madame Moreau's dollhouse and the considerably larger house that is 11 Rue Simon-Crubbellier are of equal descriptive—if not narrative—significance.

But how are Perec's characters "to inhabit this space from which the front wall is invariably missing?" His stage-sets and dollhouses are, presumably, homes to real people with real lives and relationships—yet an interesting consequence of Perec's descriptive technique is that it renders his characters wholly two-dimensional. Their physical attributes are described to us, often in detail (5) and the momentous and tragic occasions of their pasts are laid out for us in artfully woven tales. Yet, because Perec only supplies what amounts to an optically detailed snapshot of their present lives, we never actually see them *do* anything. They appear before us in tableau—smiling while reading a letter, sitting down to lunch, lying on a bed—no more life-like than very articulated dolls, regardless of their exhilarating or tumultuous histories. If we find them sitting down, they never stand or shift position. If we catch them mid-stride, we never see the other foot drop.

This strange image of a character "in lost profile, facing the stars" pervades the majority of Perec's works, with the possible exception of *A Void (La Disparition)*, *The Exeter Texts (Les Revenants)*, and some chapters of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. The subject matter of these books—one a murder mystery, one a pornographic romp through

the exploits of jewel-thievery, and the latter an autobiographical journey via childhood memory and metaphor—exempts their characters from the inert stasis demanded of others. *A Void's* Amaury and *The Exeter Texts's* Clement interact with friends, eat, have sex, travel—they *do* things. The same cannot be said of *Things. A Story of the Sixties's* (*Les Choses. Une histoire des années soixante*) Jerome and Sylvie. This couple acts entirely in past tense—“they dressed like students” (TS 39), “they gave up their room” (TS 52), “they wandered endlessly around Paris” (42) or in past perfect—“they would open the mail, they would open the newspapers. They would light their first cigarette” (TS 25), “they wouldn't meet the day after” (TS 53), “they were absolutely alone” (TS 110) or future perfect—“they will decide to be done with it” (TS 123), “they will leave Paris early one September” (TS 125). Thus, while we know what Jerome and Sylvie did, what they would do and what they might do, we have no idea what they *do* do or who they are *now*. At most, we see them only in profile.

Jerome, Sylvie, and the characters of *Life A User's Manual* “stay as [they] are”—freezing their thoughts, movements and facial expressions as if before a daguerreotype camera. Perec, the formidable photographer, holds them in their awkward and personal positions for his readers to observe. What is the consequence of this prolonged stasis? Characters pose in tableau as the minutes tick by, “with dozens of as yet unrealized projects, and a strict sense of time running out, of evening presenting the tactfully folded-over bill.” If space is the reserve of infinite possibility (or, in Oulipian terms, *potential*) then time is surely its nemesis. Time is always running out in Perec's novels, despite the fact that his characters and scenes are frozen in it.

In *Things*, time trickles depressingly onward through Jerome and Sylvie's young adulthood, eventually forcing them to settle down and live responsibly. But, for several characters in *Life a User's Manual*, time runs out quite literally. Most of the inhabitants of 11 Rue Simon-Crubbellier are very old, some in their deathbeds. The artist Valéne sometimes "had the feeling that time had been stopped, suspended, frozen around he didn't know what expectation" (LU 127). He gets the Péricien notion of painting a picture

whose laid-out, broken-up images had begun to haunt every second of his life, furnishing his dreams, squeezing his memories, the very idea of this shattered building laying bare the cracks of its past, the crumbling of its present, this unordered amassing of stories grandiose and trivial, frivolous and pathetic, gave him the impression of a grotesque mausoleum raised in the memory of companions petrified in terminal postures as insignificant in their solemnity as they were in their ordinariness, as if he had wanted both to warn of and to delay these slow or quick deaths which seemed to be engulfing the entire building storey by storey (LU 127).

Valéne's painting is an exercise in futility, demonstrated by the fact that, at the very second he ponders it, another inhabitant succumbs. Evening presents the "tactfully folded-over bill" to Bartlebooth in the end of the sixth and last part of *Life a User's Manual*. Bartlebooth's death is particularly significant—not to mention tragic—since it occurs before he is able to finish the last 62 of his 500 watercolor puzzles. His life's great project remains unrealized—eight o'clock PM, June 23rd, 1975 is the exact hour of his defeat and, cruelly, the hour at which we finally glimpse him "seated at his puzzle. He is a thin, old man, almost fleshless, with a bald head, a waxy complexion, blank eyes..." (LU 495). Upstairs a cat is sleeping on a bed while a woman makes dinner. A man is holding his arm above his head as a woman mends his jacket. Another woman is showing an invalid a postcard of a farming village. And Bartlebooth has just died.

The novel's ending is certainly disconcerting. One may well consider Perec a rather cruel and manipulative author, were it not for his final work *The Gallery Portrait*;

The Story of a Painting, written shortly before his death in 1982. In this short novel, Perec allows his character—and perhaps himself—the last laugh against space and time.

Gallery Portrait tells the story of rich entrepreneur Hermann Raffke and his formidable art collection. Having amassed a varied collection of paintings through the advice of internationally renowned curators and dealers, he commissions young painter Heinrich Kurz to create a monumental portrait of him in front of his 100 favorite pieces

(6). Kurz works for three years on the project, finally producing a

Canvas represent[ing] a large, rectangular room, without any apparent doors or windows, with its three visible walls completely covered with paintings. To the left of the foreground, a cut-glass decanter and a wine-glass stand on a small occasional table, decked with a lace tablecloth; beside it, a man sits in an armchair, upholstered in dark-green leather, with his back at a three-quarters angle to the viewer. The man is old, with abundant white hair, a thin nose with steel-rimmed spectacles. We guess more than we can really see about his facial features: his blotchy cheek, his thick mustache drooping down well over his lip, his strong bony chin. He wears a grey dressing-gown with a broad collar decorated with thin red piping (GP 128).

Perec goes on to tease that “more than one hundred paintings have been gathered together on this one canvas, reproduced so faithfully and meticulously that it would be impossible to describe them all in detail” (GP 128). Once again, as with Madame Marcia’s back room and Steinberg’s drawing, we get the impression that Perec would like to try his hand at “the wearisome task” of “listing their titles and artists” (GP 128). He manages to refrain, and cites a few of the larger pieces—a *Visitation*, a still-life—before coming to the meta-literary “dessert”:

a wonderful surprise. The artist has put his painting in the painting, so that the art collector, sitting in his gallery, has in his line of sight, on the far wall, the painting which represents himself looking at his collection of paintings, then all of the paintings themselves reproduced again without any loss of precision through the first, second and third reflections, until they are nothing more than minute brush-strokes on the canvas. *A Gallery Portrait* is not just the anecdotic depiction of a private collection, it is also, in its play of succeeding reflections and in the near-magical charm that these increasingly minuscule repetitions create, a work of art which tips us into its own oneiric universe where its power of seduction has been amplified to an infinite degree and where the agonizing precision of the medium, far from being an end in itself, suddenly opens out into the vertiginous spirituality of the Eternal Return (GP 131).

Kurz's painting is shown with a few of the collection pieces it includes at an exhibition in Pittsburgh and becomes an instant success. After an obsessed zealot throws a jar of India ink at the painting, Raffke has it and his other pieces removed from the gallery and, as the possessor of the now most famous art collection in the world—withdraws into seclusion.

He dies a year later and his funeral:

conformed to the precise instructions he had left in his will...His body was mounted by the finest taxidermist of the day, brought in especially from Mexico, was clad in the same grey dressing-gown with red piping which he was wearing in Kurz's painting, then positioned in the same armchair in which he had posed. The armchair and corpse were then taken down to a cellar which faithfully reproduced, though on a much smaller scale, the room where Raffke had hung his favourite paintings. Heinrich Kurz's vast canvas took up the entire far wall. The deceased was placed in front of the picture in a position which exactly matched the one he occupied within it...Then the cellar was sealed up (GP 137).

Thus, Raffke will remain in "lost profile," "with his back at a three-quarters angle to the viewer," one wall (its space usurped by the viewer) "invariably missing," for all eternity—a self-made tableau, staring at his own image reflected back to him infinitely.

Raffke's great collection is auctioned off, earning his estate several million dollars.

A few years later, the directors of those public and private institutions which had acquired paintings at the...Raffke sale received a letter, signed by [his nephew] Humbert Raffke, informing them that most of the works they had bought were fakes, and that he had painted them...[Many years earlier] Humbert, then a student at the School of Fine Arts in Boston, had shown the collection to one of his teachers who, after a swift examination of the paintings...had told him they were either fakes of worthless...Hermann Raffke was immediately informed and decided to get his revenge. With the help of his children, of his nephew who, it turned out, was a brilliantly talented pasticheur, and of a few supernumeraries and accomplices...he set up an operation which would, many years later—and even after his death—allow him to mystify in his turn the art collectors, experts and dealers (GP 177).

Raffke wins in the end because, much like puzzle-maker Gaspard Winkler, he plays Perec at his own game. A trickster who is not at all afraid to maneuver the rules of time and space—to willingly freeze and display himself in an eternal diorama—Raffke is the

Perecian hero at his best. It is fitting that the author, subtly auto-referential through all his texts, has Raffke for a final doppelgänger.

In the revealing *Species of Spaces*, Perec explains that to write is “to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs” (SS 92). Perec’s writing—narrative, descriptive, auto-referential, etc.—is always a struggle against the elusive nature of space and time. To fill a sheet of paper is to “inhabit [it], invest it, . . . travel across it” (SS 11)—the same is true of a room, an apartment or any other space. Unlike the complacently frozen characters in his novels, Perec fought an aggressive battle with space, attempting to own, understand and utilize it.

As a child, he wrote his address:

“George Perec
18, Rue de l’Assomption
Staircase A
Third Floor
Right-hand door
Paris 16e
Seine
France
Europe
The World
The Universe” (SS 84).

A man who confronts and plays with space so adeptly certainly deserves a piece of it for himself. In 1984, a small planet (No. 2817 [1982 UJ]) was given the name “Georges Perec.”

Endnotes

- (1) Testament to his membership in OuLiPo [Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle].
- (2) Based on the moves of a chess knight around a Latin bi-square of order 10.
- (3) “3 bathrooms. The one on the third floor is empty, in one on the second, a woman is taking a bath...3 fireplaces...6 candelabra and one Calder-style mobile...” (SS 41).
- (4) “10 adult individuals of the male sex, of whom 1 is having a drink, 1 is typing...1 is coming through the doorway into a room where there is a dog...” (SS 41).
- (5) “10 adult individuals of the male sex, of whom 1 is having a drink, 1 is typing...1 is coming through the doorway into a room where there is a dog...” (SS 41).
¹Hutting’s art collectors, though thoroughly inconsequential to the larger narrative, are described as a “woman wearing a patchwork skirt reaching down to her knees, and wide fishnet stockings...[and a] man dressed in a dark suit with red pinstripes, a pale-blue shirt with matching tie, and breast-pocket handkerchief in blue with red stripes; pepper-and-salt hair cut short and brushed up; tortoiseshell spectacles” (LU 39).
- (6) These paintings are, purportedly, the same alluded to in each chapter of *Life a User’s Manual*—an intriguing Perecian twist.

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