

Paper

Passages of the Self: Georges Perec and the Infra-ordinary

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Abstract

In an interview with Frank Venaille in 1979 entitled “Le Travail de la Mémoire,” Georges Perec provides a particularly useful inroad into the techniques he uses to construct his distinctive literary style, one that I hope can serve as a lens for this discussion as we proceed. In response to a question about his need to classify in order to understand, Perec says: ...

“This reform of the self whose criterion is a nature – but a nature that was never given and has never appeared as such in the human individual, whatever his age – all naturally takes on the appearance of a stripping away of previous education, established habits, and the environment.”
– Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*

“Questionnez vos petites cuillers.”
– Georges Perec, “Approches de quoi?”

In an interview with Frank Venaille in 1979 entitled “Le Travail de la Mémoire,” Georges Perec provides a particularly useful inroad into the techniques he uses to construct his distinctive literary style, one that I hope can serve as a lens for this discussion as we proceed. In response to a question about his need to classify in order to understand, Perec says:

De toute façon, je sais que si je classe, si j’inventorie, quelque part ailleurs il y aura des événements qui vont intervenir et brouiller cet ordre....Cela fait partie de cette opposition entre la vie et le mode d’emploi, entre la règle du jeu que l’on se donne et le paroxysme de la vie réelle qui submerge, qui détruit continuellement ce travail de mise en ordre, et heureusement d’ailleurs. (Perec 1990 90-91)

This tension between “life” and “user’s manual,” between the rules of the game and the aleatory nature of life itself, is one that floats beneath the surface of much of Perec’s work. But more than just being a necessary obstacle for a writer interested in exploring the role of constraint in literature, this tension allows for the emergence of an entirely different understanding not only of the text but of all the practices and players involved in its production, from the writer to the reader to those observed in Perec’s “sociological” mode.¹ This way of considering Perec’s work also makes clear its relation to what might otherwise seem to be a very distant concern for the care of the self, as elaborated in the work of Michel Foucault. It is in this tension between the rules one gives oneself and the paroxysms of real life that the self emerges, both in the classical Greek framework laid out by Foucault and in what I argue is the technology of the self elaborated and utilized

by Perec. He manages to formulate a way of approaching the care of the self by coming at these practices from an important new angle vis-à-vis the everyday, or the infra-ordinary. By treating a key text of Perec’s, *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*, we will see that Perec’s method of literary production is also a method of self-production, a technology of the self in the contemporary moment, one that functions as such not only for him, but for us as well by extension in our role as readers and as observers and users of the world. In addition, the methods and subject matter Perec chooses to explore in the *Tentative* will begin to help us understand the impossibility of an ethic of the self today about which Foucault is so concerned.²

Before we can examine all of these connections in depth, we have to develop an understanding of how Perec plays with the tension he discussed in “Le Travail de la Mémoire” in his own works. Dominique Rabaté, in a recent article, gives a very convincing reading of this statement in relation to Perec’s *Lieux*, an uncompleted project in which he was to investigate twelve different Parisian places over the course of twelve years, one a month, with the aid of a mathematical algorithm. There were also to be two sorts of writings on each place: “Réels” (Realities) and “Souvenirs” (Memories). The goal of the project was to show the “three-fold aging process” of the places themselves, his memories, and his writing (Rabaté 82-83). Although Perec eventually abandoned this project for a number of reasons, some interesting texts (primarily drawn from the “Réels” category) did emerge from it. Moreover, its failure proved to Perec the impossibility of over-programming his artistic output; it was precisely the aleatory events of real life that forced Perec’s hand in abandoning it.

This project, despite or perhaps due to its failure, also provides Rabaté with a backdrop on which to discuss the very tension that caused its demise, a tension which he places not in terms of “life” and “user’s manual,” but

in terms of what he calls the “subject” and the “operator.” This dialectical pairing is parallel with Perec’s: the subject, for Rabaté, is “a wilful agent or creator,” whereas the operator is something entirely other: “Anyone who falls into step with a pre-set, inherently rule-based *programme* becomes a pure operator, a being whose sole function is to carry out the various instructions established in advance as defining the work to be done” (87). Rabaté argues that the move from subject to operator that Perec engaged in with the *Lieux* project, and that many others, and especially members of Oulipo, engage in as well, is both liberating, insofar as it frees the subject from the responsibility of creation, and self-destructive, insofar as it effaces the subject in the process. The problem with this understanding of programmatic aesthetic creation is that this effacement is never complete; it is impossible to reach a point where the operator completely overtakes the subject or, to bring it back to Perec’s terms, where the user’s manual overtakes life itself. Conversely, it is impossible for the subject to completely overtake the operator, impossible to live in the world or produce (oneself as) an aesthetic project without setting some practices one will follow and techniques one will use. If we draw the connection between subject and life and between operator and user’s manual, we can see that the dualistic nature of Oulipian, or at least Perecquian, literary production that Rabaté points out here is really just the local occurrence of the dualistic global phenomenon of the tension Perec elaborates in “Le Travail de la Mémoire.” The relationship between the two elements is not linear, but dialectical: there is a continual interplay of negation between them, and it precisely this interplay which produces not only the literary result of the project, as Rabaté seems to argue, but a new role for the creator as neither subject nor operator, but as self.

I am using the concept of the self here in the same context as Foucault in his discussions of the care of the self, and so its defini-

tion is, of course, historically contingent. The one I am working with, however, and the one that Foucault relates in one of his most substantial works on the subject, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, comes from his analysis of Plato’s Alcibiades dialogue, which was the first time, Foucault says, that the care of the self was substantially articulated. In this dialogue, Socrates makes the assertion that the self is equivalent to the soul, because it is only the soul that “really uses the body, its parts and organs, and which consequently uses tools and finally language” (55). Foucault then asks the obvious and imperative question: what is the soul? He says it would be a mistake to understand the soul in this context as a separate entity that has an “instrumental relationship” with the world or the body. Instead, the soul should be understood as

the subject’s singular, transcendent position, as it were, with regard to what surrounds him, to the objects available to him, but also to other people with whom he has a relationship, to his body itself, and finally to himself. We can say that when Plato employs this notion of *khresis* [use] in order to seek the self one must take care of, it is not the soul-substance he discovers, but rather the soul-subject. (56-57)

The self is neither a divine intervention with the ability to manipulate the world nor a purely material, corporeal phenomenon, but an interplay between the two wherein it is precisely the self’s non-material character that allows it to act on the material world, and where, conversely, it is the material character of the world that allows for the existence of the self in the first place. The self is neither material nor immaterial, but it emerges when the two are put in contact with each other through the medium of the active subject, of the subject exercising *khresis*. Foucault reformulates and expands on this same point in his seminar “Technologies of the Self”: “Alcibiades tries to find the self in a dialectical movement....The care of the self is the care of the activity and not the care of the soul-substance” (230-231). The important point here is the “dialectical movement” that Fou-

cault highlights: the self is not a given, but rather produced through the subject's care and cultivation of it. It is about critically engaging with and altering one's activity. Foucault alternately terms these activities "practices," "technologies," and "techniques" of the self. It is through these technologies of the self that the subject trains to be able to act on itself and on the material world within a rule-based ethical framework. This happens through what Foucault terms "subjectivation," the process by which a subject turns society-given norms and rules into ethically actionable modes of living; technologies of self aid this process. I have raised this issue of ethics and action here so as to highlight the parallel nature of the formation of the self and the tension between subject and operator. The subject, in both schemas, realizes its ability to act and create by settings rules and techniques and working them back on itself, becoming an operator. What Foucault helps us to see is that the process does not end there; it continues as the self emerges from this rule-setting, from this constant dialectical tension between subject and operator.

We can see then how the self occupies the space between subject and operator and, by extension, between life and the user's manual. The self cannot be purely on the side of the subject or the "anarchy of the real," as Rabaté puts it, because it has the ability to transcend these categories and act on them (92). On the other hand, the self cannot be purely on the side of the user's manual or the operator because it is not just a cog in the gears of the rules of existence, but the originator of – at the very least – the implementation of those rules, if not the rules themselves. Only in the dialectical relationship between these two categories can the self be reasonably understood: it emerges in the heat of this tension, when the subject creates rules for itself, rules to live by, that it then acts back (as operator) upon and through itself as subject, a subject who is never fully capable of following all of them. It is for this reason that care of the self is a

life-long enterprise, begun, as we see in the Alcibiades, as someone reaches maturity, and never complete afterwards. There can be no perfected self, only a self that emerges in the tension between life and its rules in a constant process of self-practice. It is these practices that concern Perce, both in the *Tentative* and in many of Perce's other texts that fall under the framework of his exploration of the "*infra-ordinaire*," or the "infra-ordinary."

Perce elaborates this mode of thinking and observing in his short essay "Approches de quoi?", written, like the *Tentative*, for *Cause Commune*. He has become tired, he says, of the extraordinary, of the fact that "les trains ne se mettent à exister que lorsqu'ils déraillent" (9). Instead of those events that stand out, we should focus instead, he argues, on that which has become so habitual we do not even think about it, a level of existence he refers to as the "infra-ordinary." In order to understand and investigate this mode of being, we must question it the way we would question any extraordinary event, says Perce:

Interroger ce qui semble avoir cessé à jamais de nous étonner. Nous vivons, certes, nous respirons, certes; nous marchons, nous ouvrons des portes, nous descendons des escaliers, nous nous asseyons à une table pour manger, nous nous couchons dans un lit pour dormir. Comment? Où? Quand? Pourquoi? (12)

These sorts of habitual actions – the opening of doors and the descending of stairs – are precisely what Perce observes over the course of the *Tentative*. This mode of inquiry inevitably leads to a sort of reexamination of things taken for granted, and, therefore, a re-learning of habitual actions, a process that is very much tied up in the practice of the self. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault speaks of an "unlearning" or a "reform of the self" that "takes on the appearance of a stripping away of previous education, established habits, and the environment" (95). This is precisely the project that Perce articulates in "Approches," where he implores us to "interroger l'habituel," the "established habits" of our daily lives, and he effectuates this project

through the dual constraints of observation and writing in the *Tentative*.

Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien is a text produced during the course of, and as a record of, three days Perec spent in the Place Saint-Sulpice observing not the space itself, but the actions, happenings, or passings that took place there, or, as he says in his short introduction, “ce qui se passe quand il ne se passe rien” (12). An experiment in both writing and the everyday (a topic Perec was intensely interested in), it was published first as part of a series put together by Paul Virilio and Jean Duvignaud called *Cause Commune*, a journal dedicated to an investigation of everyday life. Over the course of these three days, Perec attempts, as his title implies, to “exhaust” the Place, to observe everything that can be observed and to write everything that can be written. In doing so, he works not only on the location but on himself as well, consistently aware of his own fatigue, hunger, thirst, and relation with that which he is observing. This last element finds its place not only in the body of the text, but in the fabric of the text itself, in the way it is approached and constructed by Perec. The dual acts of observing and writing, as well as the positions and relations they imply and necessitate, here function as constraints, allowing Perec to produce a text as a realization of the experience of his three days at the Place Saint-Sulpice. Neither of these acts, however, are fixed: Perec varies his modes of enunciation and his foci of observation throughout the three days, both due to personal preference and operational constraints.

Perec introduces his project before he records his first session at the Place Saint-Sulpice. He begins by listing all of those things that have already been extensively recorded and often noticed at the Place, from the church to the fountain, “et bien d'autres choses encore.” His project, he says, is not to further describe these elements, but rather to “décrire le reste: ce que l'on ne note généralement pas, ce qui ne se remarque pas, ce qui

n'a pas d'importance: ce qui se passe quand il ne se passe rien, sinon du temps, des gens, des voitures, et des nuages” (12). Perec's intent is not simply to observe and record *every* aspect of the Place, but to focus specifically on that which is forgotten by society, history, and our habitual patterns of recognition. In doing so, he hopes to approach an understanding of our experience of everyday life from a new angle, one that allows for a reconsideration of the very habits that render this life invisible. The dates and history of Saint-Sulpice (both church and man) have been well-recorded, as have all the other important landmarks, both large (“une fontaine que décorent les statues des quatre grands orateurs chrétiens”) and small (“un kiosque à journaux”), of the Place; stationary and unchanging, these are observable without any alteration in focus and, for Perec, remarked upon far too often (11-12). What he seeks to understand and record, rather, are those things that are fleeting, those things that pass, both in the spatial sense and the temporal sense (*passer* and *se passer*), and are quickly forgotten, if they are even noticed at all. We can say that Perec's goal is not to give meaning to that which has been deemed meaningless, to monumentalize and render stationary that which is ephemeral and unfixed, but rather to bring to the fore those meaningless elements so they can be reconsidered precisely in their lack of importance and in the very nature of having passed.³

He has many foci in this vein, but one that recurs in almost perfect allegorical fashion throughout the text is the flock of pigeons that appears to inhabit the center of the Place. It is one of the first things Perec observes, in the opening section of the first session, “Esquisse d'un inventaire de quelques-unes des choses strictement visibles”: “Une nuée de pigeons qui s'abat soudain sur le terre-plein central, entre l'église et la fontaine” (14). This observation stands out from the rest of this litany of “strictly visible” things by its movement: whereas all the other elements on the list are stationary, or at least not defined as

in motion – asphalt, the sky, a loaf of bread, people, vehicles, letters, numbers, and symbols, etc. –, the pigeons are defined by their sudden action of landing (“qui s’abat soudain”). They are also defined by their being in a group and moving together; rather than one pigeon or some pigeons, it is a flock of pigeons that Perec observes and records. As his observations and writing continue, Perec consistently refers to the pigeons in the plural, as a flock (except at one moment where he moves to the center of the Place specifically to observe them better). He makes his interest in the logic behind their actions evident:

De nouveau les pigeons font un tour de place. Qu’est-ce qui déclenche ce mouvement d’ensemble; il ne semble lié ni à un stimulus extérieur (explosion, détonation, changement de lumière, pluie, etc.) ni à une motivation particulière; cela ressemble à quelque chose de tout à fait gratuit. (26)

Why take such an interest in the movements of the pigeons if Perec’s focus in this work is on everyday life? The pigeons are certainly an essential part of the “Parisian place” that Perec is attempting to exhaust, but more importantly they provide a fitting allegory for the kinds of human practices he is attempting to observe and record. The apparent lack of motivation and “gratuitous” nature of their movements are analogous to the same features on the part of the human actions. This meaninglessness is precisely what Perec is attempting to bring out in assembling his observations of the Place Saint-Sulpice; he is looking to valorize those elements and actions that are traditionally devoid of meaning, “ce que l’on ne note généralement pas,” not by ascribing meaning to them but by holding them up in their very gratuitousness. In this way the pigeons serve as a simplified version of the complex web of interconnected practices that form everyday life, the habitual actions that are so ingrained in our daily activity that we are not even conscious of them, and which are deemed, therefore, to be without importance.

Perec focuses equally on anomalous practices in the Place, and the actions and objects

associated with them, not on the level of the extraordinary (the train derailing) but rather on the level of the infra-ordinary, which we would never notice except for Perec’s constrained method of observation and writing. One of the most obvious examples of this is on the second day, when Perec notices a man drawing on the sidewalk: “Juste en bordure du café, au pied de la vitrine et en trois emplacements différents, un homme, plutôt jeune, dessine à la craie sur le trottoir une sorte de ‘V’ à l’intérieur duquel s’ébauche une manière de point d’interrogation (land-art?)” (21). Interestingly, it is not on the fact that Perec noticed the art itself, the end-product, that this entire action hinges, but rather on the fact that he saw the *action* of the man drawing. In the observation of the infra-ordinary, it is the action of leaving the trace that counts as much as, if not more than, the trace itself, just as the care of the self is about a work on activity and not on a substance as such. As with the more regular events and traces, however, the reason behind the actions is unclear, and so Perec places a sort of narrativizing supposition about this man and his shape between parentheses: “(land-art?).” This leads to a whole string of questions and possible stories, not only about the man and his relation to his drawing, but also in the larger category of artistic creation. It is also a highly ironic aside (as are many of Perec’s – the girl and her kidnappers, for example). Land-art, as a genre, tends to be highly noticeable – or even extraordinary – in scale, using the earth itself, or natural elements, as a medium. To describe a small chalk mark with ambiguous meaning as land-art is certainly an overstatement, but in the context of Perec’s infra-ordinary observation, where extraordinary art happenings are not only unimportant but outside his field of vision, this repeated chalk mark becomes a sort of infra-ordinary type of land-art. It is a trend through its repetition, and it is tied to the land through its use of the sidewalk, which functions as the “earth” of this infra-ordinary scene. More importantly, though, its

ambiguous meaning allows Perec to revalue it, to recontextualize it in the infra-ordinary and in his own creative work in the *Tentative*.

At the beginning of the second day, in an attempt to find this same sort of stand-out element in the rest of the scene he has been observing, as well as to find changes in his quest to identify forgotten and repetitive daily actions, Perec decides to catalog all the differences he can observe between the Place on the first and second day of his *tentative*. One of the differences is quite revealing, and leads to another area of habitual observations he also deals with: “Je bois un Vittel alors que hier je buvais un café (en quoi cela transforme-t-il la Place?)” (42). Other people’s habits and actions are not the only infra-ordinary elements that Perec chooses to observe; his own feelings and activities also serve as an integral part of his project and therefore of this text. He often records what he eats or drinks, as well as his thoughts of fatigue and weariness (*lassitude*). As Michael Sheringham points out in his book *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*:

Perec is certainly sardonic when he asks whether drinking a Vittel rather than a coffee affects the way he sees the Place, but this does point to a crucial feature of his project, that its aim is not to arrive at abstract knowledge but to explore the lived experience of an individual subject seeking to apprehend a dimension of his own reality that is inseparable from his participation in the wider currents of the everyday. (271)

There is no way that Perec’s project could be complete if he chose not to take account of his own infra-ordinary existence. Just like the cars and buses and pigeons and pedestrians, Perec is a participant in and a user of the space of the Place Saint-Sulpice, and he never attempts to place himself outside of that role as something like an external observer. In the role of observer, he is already immediately implicated in the functioning of the Place, especially since, to others, he is only one of many people sitting at a table in a cafe with pen and paper in front of them. What matters is his attempt to think about his own actions within

the context of both his aesthetic production and his everyday life. The only time Perec remarks that someone else notices his position as observer and recorder, he appears shocked, in an ironic and self-deprecating gesture on Perec’s part: “Un promeneur qui ressemble assez vaguement à Michel Mohrt repasse devant le café et semble s’étonner de me voir encore attablé devant un vittel et des feuillets” (43). Perec is consistently aware of his own role as writer and observer in the context of the Place; even though the passer-by presumably does not know Perec (he only vaguely looks like Michel Mohrt, a member of the *Académie Française* over twenty years Perec’s elder), he seems shocked to see him *still* sitting, as if he had seen him before. This may or may not be the case, but the fact that Perec chooses to relate this scene and phrase it in the way that he does shows his awareness of his own position as writer *and* user of the Place.

This Michel Mohrt lookalike is not the only doppelgänger Perec sees during the course of the *Tentative* (at one point he sees someone who looks like Peter Sellers), nor is it the only person he recognizes or who recognizes him. Not only aware of his role as user of the Place, he actively engages with it as well, noticing or speaking to many people throughout the three days, including Paul Virilio and Jean Duvignaud (the editors of *Cause Commune*, for which he is writing this piece), as well as Geneviève Serreau, whom he calls over in order to say hello (24). Acquaintances also notice him: “Une lointaine connaissance (amie d’amie, amie d’amie d’amie) est passée dans la rue, est venue me dire bonjour, a pris un café” (45). These are the sorts of things that can happen to anyone in the street, and so Perec makes it clear that, though he may be an observer and recorder, he is not outside the infra-ordinary he is attempting to get at (nor could he be). This sort of self-awareness on his part also makes it clear that this relationship goes both ways: just as Perec as an observer is not above the everyday, neither does our role as participants in everyday life make us un-

able to observe it. Just as Perec's unique role as observer is called into question by his observations, so too are other habits he believed were uniquely his own:

Sur le trottoir, il y a un homme secoué, mais pas encore ravagé, de tics (mouvement de l'épaule comme s'il éprouvait une démangeaison continuelle dans le cou); il tient sa cigarette de la même façon que moi (entre le medius et l'annulaire): c'est la première fois que je retrouve chez un autre cette habitude. (30)

Here Perec has found, through his unique cigarette-holding habit, his own doppelgänger, afflicted by a continual itch and tic. In a work of "pure" fiction, it would be obvious that this character is a representation of the writer in the text, and his "itch" is in reality a representation of the author's need to write, to continually move his hand across a page and make marks with a pen. But this is a work of observation and recording, and nothing more (or at least Perec's stated constraints would have us believe). Recognizing himself in a stranger, or recognizing in a potential stranger someone he actually knows, Perec's infra-ordinary practices and habits are connected to those of others, and thus to the rhythm of the Place. A unified picture of the infra-ordinary functioning of the Place Saint-Sulpice begins to emerge in this text, one that contains the organizing and repetitive passing of the buses, the regular movement of the pigeons, the various habits and practices of the many passers-by, Perec himself observing and writing, "et bien d'autres choses encore," as Perec himself says in his introduction (12).

Despite this, however, the Place Saint-Sulpice is not yet *épuisée*, if it even ever could be. What would it even mean to exhaust the Place? Perec gives us some indication in the chapter on "The Street" in *Espèces d'espaces*, published in 1974, the same year the *Tentative* was written:

Continuer
Jusqu'à ce que le lieu devienne improbable
jusqu'à ressentir, pendant un très bref instant,
l'impression d'être dans une ville étrangère. (105)

Towards the end of the *Tentative*, Perec reaches precisely this moment:

En ne regardant qu'un seul détail, par exemple la rue Férou, et pendant suffisamment de temps (une à deux minutes), on peut, sans aucune difficulté, s'imaginer que l'on est à Etampes ou à Bourges, ou même quelque part à Vienne (Autriche) où je n'ai d'ailleurs jamais été. (59)

In the moment of potential exhaustion, of complete anonymity and universality of the infra-ordinary life of the Place Saint-Sulpice, Perec is forced to acknowledge that one place he imagines he might be, lost in observation, is a place that he has never been – and that he could, therefore, be entirely wrong about the resemblance and the abstraction. The subject can never fully be transformed into operator, the user's manual can never supersede life itself, the constraint can never overtake the writer's own knowledge and ability; but in this impossibility there is something to be learned, something to be created that is formed in the attempt to accomplish the impossible: a self, constituted through its own actions, a self as actor in the larger context of his space and life. We saw this in Perec's identification with the smoking man, and in a more oblique way throughout the *Tentative*, from his interest in the pigeons to his remarks on the "land-art." And in this moment when the task seems nearest to completion, we find it again, hindering the absolute transformation from subject to operator and revealing, instead, the ongoing task of self-cultivation and the never-ending, impossible-to-exhaust march of infra-ordinary existence.

Subjective constraints on the part of Perec are not the only reason that the *tentative d'épuisement* of the Place Saint-Sulpice can never be an *épuisement total*; after this moment of potential exhaustion, the habitual actions of the users of the Place also continue, and Perec continues to record them. Perec himself notes the "rareté des accalmies totales: il y a toujours un passant au loin, ou une voiture qui passe" (60). Then, in the final two observations in the text, Perec recapitulates all

the major elements of the Place he has observed over the past three days:

Les pigeons sont sur le terre-plein. Ils s'envolent tous en même temps.
Quatre enfants. Un chien. Un petit rayon de soleil. Le 96. Il est deux heures (60)

And this is how the text ends, repeating all that which we have seen throughout: passers-by, animals, the weather, buses, the time, and, of course, the pigeons. There is no period at the end of the last sentence (as, by the way, is the case throughout much of the *Tentative*), yet another indication that all the actions Perce observed over the past three days will continue for as long into the future as imaginable – at least in the context of the infra-ordinary. This is precisely why the title of this work is “*Attempt to exhaust a place in Paris*”: something will always happen, even when nothing is happening. This “something” happens, in Perce’s language, in the form of micro-events, those small actions, habitual or at least small enough that they would otherwise go unnoticed, but nevertheless disrupting the “background noise” that organizes the infra-ordinary, events that are deemed unimportant, forgotten by society. Perce first mentions this concept on the first day, at the beginning of his second observational session: “plusieurs dizaines, plusieurs centaines d’action simultanées, de micro-événements dont chacun implique des postures, des actes moteurs, des dépenses d’énergie spécifiques” (18). The flight of the pigeons, the passage of two nuns or a schoolboy, a crowd of people with umbrellas entering the church – these are all micro-events. They punctuate the fabric of the infra-ordinary, a fabric that is virtually impossible to see on its own, as Perce points out:

Cela suscite l’éveil, l’ironie, la participation de l’assistance: ne pas voir les seules déchirures, mais le tissu (mais comment voir le tissu si ce sont seulement les déchirures qui le font apparaître: personne ne voit jamais passer les autobus, sauf s’il en attend un, ou s’il attend quelqu’un qui va en descendre, ou si la R.A.T.P. l’appointe pour les dénombrer...) (46)

It is only through altering one’s method of

focusing that one can see the fabric of the infra-ordinary, a fabric that is only rendered visible through the tears that appear in it, tears that take the form of micro-events. So while it is the movement from subject to operator in the realm of the infra-ordinary that creates the self through Perce’s constrained writing, it is the recuperation of meaningless micro-events that make this movement possible; the micro-event, as something that would otherwise go unnoticed, opens up a space for a practice of the self. Since the infra-ordinary itself cannot be observed directly, the tears in its fabric allow Perce to latch on, to obliquely approach the infra-ordinary and thus to effectuate his operational writing which is, in itself, a technology of the self.

These sorts of micro-events appear not just on the level of the infra-ordinary, but on the level of the written text as well, in the form of what Michael Sheringham, in an article on the subject, refers to as “stylistic micro-events”: “But just as he finds himself tuning into micro-events...so we become conscious of stylistic micro-events: shifts of register, phrase-structure, or sentence length which...create a field of difference where all at first seemed the same” (2000 197). These stylistic micro-events abound in the *Tentative*, from minor changes in the way Perce chooses to record time or the passage of a bus – “Le 96 va à la gare Montparnasse,” for example, and then later “Un 96 passe,” and then again “Passe un 96 plutôt plein” – and changes in register – the colloquial “J’ai envie de me changer les idées. Lire ‘le Monde’. Changer de crèmerie” (33) versus the formal “La nuit, l’hiver: aspect irréel des passants” (38) – to poetic techniques such as alliteration – “Passe un papa poussant poussette” (35). They serve two functions: they implicate Perce’s writing in the infra-ordinary fabric that he is attempting to record, linking Perce-as-writer with Perce-as-observer, and they bring the reader into this rhythm of micro-events, making the experience of reading the *Tentative* as akin as possible to actually producing it. Again, Mi-

chael Sheringham (this time from *Everyday Life*):

The brilliance of TELP as a verbal artefact lies in the fact that all the points we can make about its language turn out to be points about the matter that this act of enunciation seeks to address. And the way we discover more and more in the text, when we read it again, matches the way observing the everyday brings about a transmutation of attention, making visible a thing that was, according to Perce, disguised by the narrowness of our habitual modes of seeing. (268)

In other words, through the stylistic micro-events that Perce includes in his text, the reader becomes engaged in the technology of the self that is his infra-ordinary observation, moving from subject to operator through the operational constraints of the practice of reading this text and thus participating in its imperative to self-care. The reader of the *Tentative* has no choice but to begin to observe her own actions and place in the infra-ordinary, to look at the tension between the user's manual for her reading (and for her existence at large) and the paroxysms of her life itself. She connects with the micro-events of the people Perce observes – for example, the man who pulls the cafe door instead of pushing and is briefly unable to open it (who has not made that mistake at some point?) – and the enunciative micro-events embedded in the text itself. And just as Perce's self-practice through observed micro-events becomes imbued in the body of the text through stylistic micro-events, so too does this technology of the self become imbued in the reader's practice of reading (and, potentially, observing and living) through her attachment to certain micro-events in the text. In this way the text serves as the passage between varying practices of living, writing, reading, and observing, allowing for their transmission and the extension of the technologies of self they imply.

Though thoroughly modern in its substance, the form of this technology of the self is not so different from ones practiced during the golden age of the culture of the self that Foucault discusses in "Technologies of the

Self," specifically from the practice of epistolary self-cultivation:

The new care of the self involved a new experience of self....A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of self was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent. (232-233)

Foucault then goes on to cite a letter of Marcus Aurelius in which he is concerned "with the details of daily life, with the movements of the spirit, [and] with self-analysis" (233). He speaks, much as Perce does, about his own rhythm for the day, what he spent his time doing, what he ate, and the thoughts he considered in conversation. While different in scope, the content of the letter greatly resembles the sort of focus on the ordinary and habitual that Perce takes on in the *Tentative*. Even though Marcus Aurelius is more concerned with his own actions than with those of others, the meticulous observation and writing, as well as the purposeful direction towards a reader, is strikingly similar. This parallel reveals the way that Perce's constrained writing functions not only as an exploration of the infra-ordinary but as a technology of the self, one that, much like Marcus Aurelius's letter, implicates both the practices of the writer and of the reader. For both Marcus Aurelius and Perce, as Foucault says in "On the Genealogy of Ethics," "the self is not merely given but is constituted in relationship to itself as subject," through, I would add, the user's manual or the "règles du jeu" (280).

But this constant "vigilance," both on the part of Perce and Marcus Aurelius, reveals a fundamental paradox: how does one shed light on that which goes unnoticed without rendering it all-too-observed, and thereby useless, itself? Perce achieves this task by sitting in the tension between foreground and background, between the fabric of the infra-ordinary and that which has been "décrites, inventoriées, photographiées, racontées ou recensées" (Perce 1975 12). While Perce uses

many of these functions (description, inventory, and narrativization, to name a few), he always does so in the context of a “tentative,” an attempt, with the full knowledge that there cannot be a complete inventory, a realistically accurate description, or a story that truly portrays passages as they occurred. Even his opening list of that which has been all-too-often observed at the Place remains incomplete: “et bien d’autres choses encore” (12). As author and observer, Perec situates himself between background and foreground, reversing roles and revealing impossibilities: he attempts to remove himself from the scene, becoming merely a part of the background, but cannot help but record his own feelings and impressions, consistently failing to escape from his limited range of vision, which always forces some things to the fore. Rather than simply try to move the infra-ordinary into the realm of the ordinary, Perec shifts his focus (and the reader’s) in such a way that the integrity of both are called into question: neither can be fully accounted for or completely overtake the other. As with the operator/subject distinction with which we opened this exploration of the infra-ordinary self, Perec uses the vigilance of his position as observer/writer to play off the dialectical negation of background and foreground. This serves to open up the possibility of a self, like Marcus Aurelius’s, that emerges from this tension and can act back upon itself, precisely due to its oblique view of everyday life.

This parallel between Marcus Aurelius and Perec also reveals an essential distinction: everyday life was a fundamentally different phenomenon in the time of Marcus Aurelius than in the time of Perec. While both eat, drink, and experience their bodies, they each do so in different positions and with different external influences. According to Foucault, in his essay “The Subject and Power,” everyday life is the site of a certain form of power relations in the contemporary moment, one that functions specifically to shape identity and subjectivity:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. (331)

In this framework power exercised in everyday life directly influences the formation of individuals as subjects. (Remember that Foucault defines the self as the “soul-subject.”) This implies another paradox about Perec’s project: in a world where power extends into the field of the everyday, and that power fashions subjectivities, how is it that Perec’s operational constraints on himself and his writing can be liberating? Foucault addresses this very issue in his thoughts on power and subject formation. As we saw through Foucault’s treatment of Alcibiades above, the self that emerges from its care is in the action and not in the substance; similarly, the subject fashioned through this type (and all types) of power relations is, as Foucault says, not a substance but “a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself” (Foucault 1997, 290). While the subject/self is created in the heat of these power relations, it is not a static object, but a form that is to be filled and shaped by the many forces that act on it, including the subject itself. In fact, the subject’s freedom to act is a fundamental aspect of Foucault’s understanding of power: “There is not a face-to-face confrontation of power and freedom as mutually exclusive facts (freedom disappearing everywhere power is exercised) but a much more complicated interplay. In this game, freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power” (2000, 342). Just as freedom can serve as the condition for the exercise of power, so too can power function as the condition for the exercise of freedom in Foucault’s model of subject formation. Referring again to the Greek model of self-care, Foucault relates that “being free means not being a slave to oneself and one’s appetites, which means that with respect to oneself one establishes a certain re-

lationship of domination, of mastery, which was called *arkhe*, or power, command” (1997, 286). Only a free subject can be in a power relationship; only a subject on whom power is acted (by himself, in this case) can be truly free. Rather than adversarial forces, power and freedom work in constant (dialectical) interplay in this model, creating the subject in their wake.

When he constrains his actions and writing, Perce comes remarkably close to replicating the Greek model of power/freedom that Foucault outlines in his treatment of the self, which is, he says, “not a discovering of a truth hidden inside the self but an attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one’s available freedom.” Foucault then goes on to describe a daily practice recommended by Epictetus, a great Greek thinker of self-care, in which one should, while walking in the city each morning, try to determine one’s motives and relationship with each thing (“a public official or an attractive woman,” Foucault adds here parenthetically, focusing not coincidentally on the figure of the passer-by). This exercise is meant to determine whether “one has sufficient self-mastery so as to be indifferent” (Foucault 1997 276). Perce enacts a similar constraint on himself, but takes the project one step further by calling it a “tentative,” by constantly expressing his own boredom

and fatigue, by mocking himself through doppelgangers and surprised passers-by that marvel at his bizarre state as writer/observer, and by all the other gestures he makes towards the impossibility of his task. In sum, Perce relates these moments of failure so as to even more masterfully reside in the tension between power, in the form of constraint, and freedom, in the form of his own identity, relationships, and feelings; in other words, to reside between the operator and the subject, between the user’s manual and life itself. It is in this tension between rule setting and the impossibility of following through on these rules that the self, constituted in relation to itself as a subject with the ability to act both on itself and on the world around it, is formed and practiced in Perce’s work. Despite Foucault’s declaration that “we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self,” such an ethic is proposed, albeit it in a different form, in *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (Foucault 2005, 252). Through careful observation and recording of the micro-events that occur in the fabric of the infra-ordinary, Perce opens up a space for self-care that integrates his own actions, his text, and, therefore, his readers into the realm of the everyday.

Notes

- 1 In his essay “Notes sur ce que je cherche” (Perec 2003), Perec says that all of his literary production fall into one (or usually more) or four categories: the sociological (relating to everyday life), the autobiographical, the ludic (relating to usually Oulipian constraints), and the novelistic.
- 2 “I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task” (Foucault 2005, 252).
- 3 Perec is not the first person to attempt to bring the background passages/practices to the foreground of our attention; Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, sets out quite a similar agenda, one that includes explicit references to Foucault’s thought: “one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay; one can follow the warming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy...to the point of constituting everyday regulations and surreptitious creativities that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization” (96).

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