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Species of Spaces  
and Other Pieces

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PENGUIN BOOKS

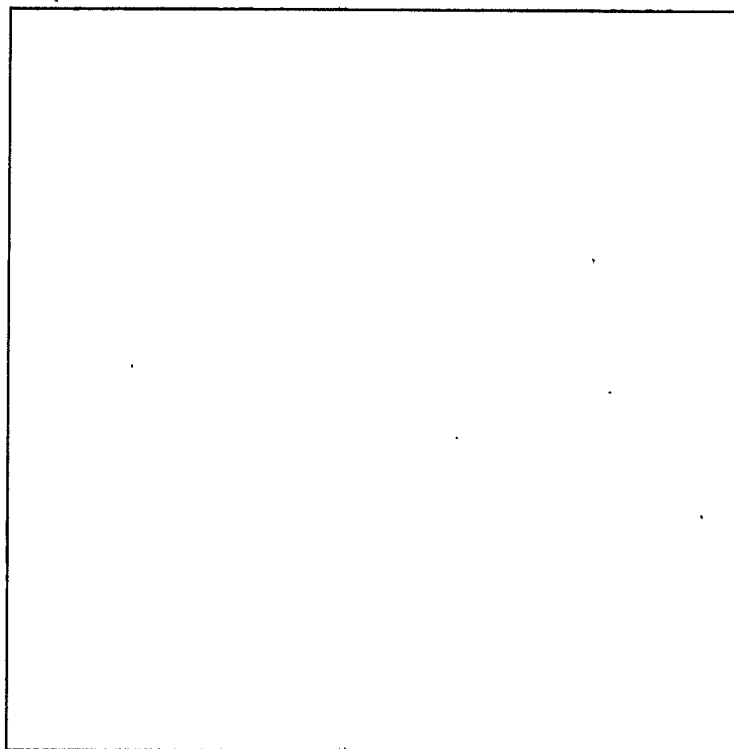


Figure 1: Map of the Ocean  
(taken from Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*)

SPACE  
 OPEN SPACE  
 ENCLOSED SPACE  
 OUTER SPACE  
 SPACE SUIT  
 SPACE AGE  
 LIVING SPACE  
 PROJECTIVE SPACE  
 SPACE CAPSULE  
 LACK OF SPACE  
 SPACE BAND  
 SPACE HEATER  
 DEEP SPACE  
 SPACE ODYSSEY  
 SPACE SALESMAN  
 EUCLIDEAN SPACE  
 SPACE CADET  
 SPACE STATION  
 BLANK SPACE  
 SPACE OUT  
 PARKING SPACE  
 SPACE INVADERS  
 SPACE WALK  
 SPACE TIME CONTINUUM  
 SPACE BAR  
 LOST IN SPACE  
 STARING INTO SPACE  
 WATCH THIS SPACE  
 SPACE CURVE  
 SPACE LATTICE  
 SPACE OPERA  
 CATCHER SPACE  
 SPACE SICKNESS  
 BUNCHER SPACE  
 THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACE  
 HAIR SPACE  
 SPACE RACE  
 NULL SPACE

LEAVE A SPACE  
 SPACE OF A MOMENT  
 INTERCOSTAL SPACE  
 AVAILABLE SPACE  
 SPACE NEEDLE  
 POSITION IN SPACE  
 EDGES OF SPACE  
 SPACE WRITER  
 WIDE OPEN SPACES  
 LACK OF SPACE  
 SPACE SAVING  
 ENCLOSED SPACE  
 SPACE FILLER  
 WASTED SPACE

## Foreword

The subject of this book is not the void exactly, but rather what there is round about or inside it (cf Fig. 1). To start with, then, there isn't very much: nothingness, the impalpable, the virtually immaterial; extension, the external, what is external to us, what we move about in the midst of, our ambient milieu, the space around us.

Space. Not so much those infinite spaces, whose mutism is so prolonged that it ends by triggering off something akin to fear, nor the already almost domesticated interplanetary, intersidereal or intergalactic spaces, but spaces that are much closer to hand, in principle anyway: towns, for example, or the countryside, or the corridors of the Paris Métro, or a public park.

We live in space, in these spaces, these towns, this countryside, these corridors, these parks. That seems obvious to us. Perhaps indeed it should be obvious. But it isn't obvious, not just a matter of course. It's real, obviously, and as a consequence most likely rational. We can touch: We can even allow ourselves to dream. There's nothing, for example, to stop us from imagining things that are neither towns nor countryside (nor suburbs), or Métro corridors that are at the same time public parks. Nor anything to forbid us imagining a Métro in the heart of the countryside [*campagne*] (I've even before now seen an advertisement to that effect, but it was — how shall I put it? — a publicity campaign [*campagne*]).

What's certain, in any case, is that at a time too remote no doubt for any of us to have retained anything like a precise memory of it, there was none of all this: neither corridors, nor parks, nor towns, nor countryside. The problem isn't so much to find out how we have reached this point, but simply to recognize that we have reached it, that we are here. There isn't one space, a beautiful space, a beautiful space round about, a beautiful space all around

us, there's a whole lot of small bits of space, and one of these bits is a Métro corridor, and another of them is a public park. Another – and here we suddenly enter into much more particularized spaces – originally quite modest in size, has attained fairly colossal dimensions and has become Paris, whereas a space near by, not necessarily any less well endowed to begin with, has been content to remain Pontoise. Still another space, much larger and vaguely hexagonal, has been surrounded by a broad dotted line (innumerable events, some of them particularly weighty, had as their sole purpose the tracing out of this dotted line) and it has been decided that everything found *inside* this dotted line should be coloured violet and be called France, while everything found *outside* this dotted line should be in a different colour (although, outside the aforesaid hexagon, they weren't in the least anxious to be of a uniform colour: one bit of space wanted its colour and another bit its, whence the famous problem in topology of the four colours, unresolved to this day) and have a different name (in point of fact and for quite a few years, there was a strong insistence on colouring violet – and thereby calling France – bits of space that didn't belong to the aforesaid hexagon, but were often far distant from it, but, generally speaking, that didn't last half so well).

In short, spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified. There are spaces today of every kind and every size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself.

or, if you prefer:

#### ACT ONE

A voice (off):

To the North, nothing.

To the South, nothing.

To the East, nothing.

To the West, nothing.

In the centre, nothing.

The curtain falls. End of Act One.

#### ACT TWO

A voice (off):

To the North, nothing.

To the South, nothing.

To the East, nothing.

To the West, nothing.

In the centre, a tent.

The curtain falls. End of Act Two.

#### ACT THREE AND LAST

A voice (off):

To the North, nothing.

To the South, nothing.

To the East, nothing.

To the West, nothing.

In the centre, a tent,

and,

in front of the tent,

an orderly busy polishing a pair  
of boots

with 'LION NOIR' boot polish!

The curtain falls. End of Act Three and Last.

(Author unknown. Learnt around 1947, recalled in 1973.)

Or again:

*In Paris, there is a street;  
in that street, there is a house;  
in that house, there is a staircase;  
on that staircase, there is a room;  
in that room, there is a table;  
on that table, there is a cloth;  
on that cloth, there is a cage;  
in that cage, there is a nest;  
in that nest, there is an egg;  
in that egg, there is a bird.*

*The bird knocked the egg over;  
the egg knocked the nest over;  
the nest knocked the cage over;  
the cage knocked the cloth over;  
the cloth knocked the table over;  
the table knocked the room over;  
the room knocked the staircase over;  
the staircase knocked the house over;  
the house knocked the street over;  
the street knocked the town of Paris over.*

Children's song from Les Deux-Sèvres  
(Paul Eluard, *Poésie involontaire*  
*et poésie intentionnelle*)

## *The Page*

'I write in order to peruse myself'

Henri Michaux

1

I write ...

I write: I write ...

I write: 'I write ...'

I write that I write ...

etc.

I write: I trace words on a page.

Letter by letter, a text forms, affirms itself, is confirmed, is frozen,  
is fixed:

a fairly strictly h

o  
r  
i  
z  
o  
n  
t  
a  
l

line is set down on the blank sheet of  
paper, blackens the virgin space, gives it a direction, vectorizes it:  
from left to right

f  
r  
o  
m

t  
o  
p  
t  
o  
b  
o  
t  
t  
o  
m

Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn't much, a few signs, but which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left, a recto and a verso.

## 2

The space of a sheet of paper (regulation international size, as used in Government departments, on sale at all stationers) measures 623.7 sq. cm. You have to write a little over sixteen pages to take up one square metre. Assuming the average format of a book to be 21 by 29.7 cm, you could, if you were to pull apart all the printed books kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale and spread the pages carefully out one beside the other, cover the whole, either of the island of St Helena or of Lake Trasimeno.

You could also work out the number of hectares of forest that have had to be felled in order to produce the paper needed to print the works of Alexandre Dumas (*père*), who, it will be remembered, had a tower built each stone of which had the title of one of his books engraved on it.

## 3

I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it.

I incite *blanks, spaces* (jumps in the meaning: discontinuities, transitions, changes of key).

I write  
in the  
margin

I start a new

paragraph. I refer to a footnote<sup>1</sup>

I go to a new sheet of paper.

1. I am very fond of footnotes at the bottom of the page, even if I don't have anything in particular to clarify there.

There are few events which don't leave a written trace at least. At one time or another, almost everything passes through a sheet of paper, the page of a notebook, or of a diary, or some other chance support (a Métro ticket, the margin of a newspaper, a cigarette packet, the back of an envelope etc.) on which, at varying speeds and by a different technique depending on the place, time or mood, one or another of the miscellaneous elements that comprise the everydayness of life comes to be inscribed. Where I'm concerned (but I'm no doubt too choice an example, writing being in fact one of my principal activities), this goes from an address caught in passing, an appointment noted down in haste, or the writing-out of a cheque, an envelope or a package, to the laborious drafting of an official letter, the tedious filling-in of a form (tax return, sickness note, direct debit for gas and electricity bills, subscription form, contract, lease, endorsement, receipt etc.), to a list of urgently needed supplies (coffee, sugar, cat litter, Baudrillard book, 75-watt bulb, batteries, underwear etc.), from the sometimes rather tricky solution to a Robert Scipion crossword to the fair copy of a finally completed text, from notes taken at some lecture or other to the instant scribbling-down of some device that may come in useful (verbal play, verbal ploy, play on letters, or what's commonly known as an 'idea'), from a piece of literary 'work' (writing, yes, sitting down at the table and writing, sitting at the typewriter and writing, writing right through the day, or right through the night, roughing out a plan, putting down capital *Is* and small *as*, drawing sketches, putting one word next to another, looking in a dictionary, recopying, rereading, crossing-out, throwing away, rewriting, sorting, rediscovering, waiting for it to come, trying to extract something that might resemble a text from something that continues to look like an insubstantial scrawl, getting there, not getting there, smiling (sometimes), etc.) to work full stop (elementary, alimentary): i.e. to ticking, in a journal containing a summary of almost all the others in the field of the life sciences, the titles that may be of interest to the research-

workers whose bibliographical documentation I am supposed to provide, filling in index-cards, assembling references, correcting proofs, etc.

Et cetera.

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet?

Space as inventory, space as invention. Space begins with that model map in the old editions of the *Petit Larousse Illustré*, which used to represent something like 65 geographical terms in 60 sq. cm., miraculously brought together, deliberately abstract. Here is the desert, with its oasis, its wadi and its salt lake, here are the spring and the stream, the mountain torrent, the canal, the confluence, the river, the estuary, the river-mouth and the delta, here is the sea with its islands, its archipelago, its islets, its reefs, its shoals, its rocks, its offshore bar, and here are the strait, the isthmus and the peninsula, the bight and the narrows, and the gulf and the bay, and the cape and the inlet, and the head, and the promontory, here are the lagoon and the cliff, here are the dunes, here are the beach, and the saltwater lakes, and the marshes, here is the lake, and here are the mountains, the peak, the glacier, the volcano, the spur, the slope, the col, the gorge, here are the plain and the plateau, and the hillside and the hill, here is the town and its anchorage, and its harbour and its lighthouse . . .

Virtual space, a simple pretext for a nomenclature. But you don't even need to close your eyes for the space evoked by these words, a dictionary space only, a paper space, to become alive, to be

populated, to be filled: a long goods train drawn by a steam locomotive passes over a viaduct; barges laden with gravel ply the canals; small sailing boats manoeuvre on the lake; a big liner escorted by tugs enters the anchorage; children play ball on the beach; an Arab wearing a big straw hat trots down the shady paths of the oasis on his donkey . . .

The streets of the town are full of cars. A turbaned housewife is beating a carpet at her window. In small suburban plots, dozens of nurserymen are pruning fruit trees. A detachment of soldiers presents arms as an official wearing a tricolour sash unveils the statue of a general.

There are cows in the pasture, winegrowers in the vineyards, lumberjacks in the forests, climbers roped together in the mountains. A postman on his bicycle pedals laboriously up the hairpin bends of a lane. There are washerwomen beside the river, roadmen beside the roads, and farmers' wives feeding the hens. Rows of children are coming out in twos into the school yard. A *fin-de-siècle* villa stands all on its own surrounded by tall glass buildings. There are little gingham curtains in the windows, drinkers on the terraces of the cafés, a cat warming itself in the sun, a lady weighed down by parcels hailing a taxi, a sentry mounting guard in front of a public building. There are garbage-collectors filling refuse trucks, decorators putting up scaffolding. There are nannies in the squares, second-hand booksellers along the quays; there's a queue in front of the bakery, one gentleman walking his dog, another reading his newspaper sitting on a bench, another watching workmen demolishing a block of houses. There's a policeman controlling the traffic. There are birds in the trees, sailors on the river, fishermen on the embankment. There's a woman raising the iron shutter of her haberdashery. There are chestnut-vendors, sewer-men, newspaper-sellers. There are people doing their shopping.

Studious readers are reading in the libraries. Teachers are giving their lessons. Students are taking notes. Accountants are lining up

columns of figures. Apprentice pastry cooks are stuffing cream into rows of cream puffs. Pianists are playing their scales. Sitting deep in thought at their tables, writers are forming lines of words.

An idealized scene. Space as reassurance.



## *The Apartment*

1

For two years, I had a very old neighbour. She had lived in the building for seventy years, had been a widow for sixty. In the last years of her life, after she had broken the neck of her femur, she never went further than the landing on her own floor. The concierge, or a young boy from the building, ran her errands. Several times she stopped me on the stairs to ask me what day it was. One day I went to get her a slice of ham. She offered me an apple and invited me in. She lived surrounded by exceedingly gloomy furniture that she spent her time rubbing.

2

A few years ago, one of my friends had the idea of living for a whole month in an international airport, without ever leaving it (unless, all international airports being by definition identical, to catch a plane that would have taken him to another international airport). To my knowledge, he has never realized this project, but it's hard to see what, objectively, there might be to prevent him. The activities essential to life, and most social activities, can be carried out without difficulty within the confines of an international airport: there are deep armchairs and bench seats that aren't too uncomfortable, and often restrooms even, in which passengers in transit can take a nap. You've got toilets, baths and showers, and often saunas and Turkish baths. You've got hairdressers, pedicurists, nurses, masseurs and physiotherapists, bootblacks, dry cleaners who are equally happy to mend heels and make duplicate keys, watchmakers and opticians. You've got restaurants, bars and cafeterias, leather shops and perfumeries,

florists, bookshops, record shops, tobacconists and sweet shops, shops selling pens and photographers. You've got food shops, cinemas, a post office, flying secretarial services and, naturally, a whole host of banks (since it's practically impossible, in this day and age, to live without having dealings with a bank).

The interest of such an undertaking would lie above all in its exoticism: a displacement, more apparent than real, of our habits and rhythms, and minor problems of adaptation. It would quite soon become tedious no doubt. All told, it would be too easy and, as a consequence, not very testing. Seen in this light, an airport is no more than a sort of shopping mall, a simulated urban neighbourhood. Give or take a few things, it offers the same benefits as a hotel. So we could hardly draw any practical conclusion from such an undertaking, by way of either subversion or acclimatization. At most, we might use it as the subject-matter for a piece of reportage, or as the point of departure for an umpteenth comic screenplay.

3

A bedroom is a room in which there is a bed; a dining-room is a room in which there are a table and chairs, and often a sideboard; a sitting-room is a room in which there are armchairs and a couch; a kitchen is a room in which there is a cooker and a water inlet; a bathroom is a room in which there is a water inlet above a bathtub; when there is only a shower, it is known as a shower-room; when there is only a wash-basin it is known as a cloakroom; an entrance-hall is a room in which at least one of the doors leads outside the apartment; in addition, you may find a coat-rack in there; a child's bedroom is a room into which you put a child; a broom closet is a room into which you put brooms and the vacuum cleaner; a maid's bedroom is a room that you let to a student.

From this list, which might easily be extended, two elementary conclusions may be drawn that I offer by way of definitions:

1. Every apartment consists of a variable, but finite, number of rooms.
2. Each room has a particular function.

It would seem difficult, or rather it would seem derisory, to question these self-evident facts. Apartments are built by architects who have very precise ideas of what an entrance-hall, a sitting-room (living-room, reception room), a parents' bedroom, a child's room, a maid's room, a box-room, a kitchen, and a bathroom ought to be like. To start with, however, all rooms are alike, more or less, and it is no good their trying to impress us with stuff about modules and other nonsense; they're never anything more than a sort of cube, or let's say rectangular parallelepiped. They always have at least one door and also, quite often, a window. They're heated, let's say by a radiator, and fitted with one or two power points (very rarely more, but if I start in on the niggardliness of building contractors, I shall never stop). In sum, a room is a fairly malleable space.

I don't know, and don't want to know, where functionality begins or ends. It seems to me, in any case, that in the ideal dividing-up of today's apartments functionality functions in accordance with a procedure that is unequivocal, sequential and nycthemeral.<sup>1</sup> The activities of the day correspond to slices of time, and to each slice of time there corresponds one room of the apartment. The following model is hardly a caricature:

07.00	The mother gets up and goes to get breakfast in the	KITCHEN
07.15	The child gets up and goes into the	BATHROOM
07.30	The father gets up and goes into the	BATHROOM
07.45	The father and the child, have their breakfast in the	KITCHEN
08.00	The child takes his coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL

1. This is the best phrase in the whole book!

	and goes off to school	
08.15	The father takes his coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL
	and goes off to his office	
08.30	The mother performs her toilet in the	BATHROOM
08.45	The mother takes the vacuum cleaner from the	BROOM CLOSET
	and does the housework (she then goes through all the rooms of the apartment but I forbear from listing them)	
09.30	The mother fetches her shopping basket from the	KITCHEN
	and her coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL
	and goes to do the shopping	
10.30	The mother returns from shopping and puts her coat back in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
10.45	The mother prepares lunch in the	KITCHEN
12.15	The father returns from the office and hangs his coat up in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
12.30	The father and the mother have lunch in the (the child is a day boarder)	DINING-ROOM
13.15	The father takes his coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL
	and leaves again for his office	
13.30	The mother does the dishes in the	KITCHEN
14.00	The mother takes her coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL
	and goes out for a walk or	

- to run some errands before  
going to fetch the child  
from school
- 16.15 The mother and the child  
return and put their coats  
back in the ENTRANCE-HALL
- 16.30 The child has his tea in the KITCHEN
- 16.45 The child goes to do his  
homework in the CHILD'S ROOM
- 18.30 The mother gets supper  
ready in the KITCHEN
- 18.45 The father returns from his  
office and puts his coat  
back in the ENTRANCE-HALL
- 18.50 The father goes to wash his  
hands in the BATHROOM
- 19.00 The whole small family  
has supper in the DINING-ROOM
- 20.00 The child goes to brush his  
teeth in the BATHROOM
- 20.15 The child goes to bed in  
the CHILD'S ROOM
- 20.30 The father and the mother  
go into the SITTING-ROOM  
they watch television, or  
else they listen to the radio,  
or else they play cards, or  
else the father reads the  
newspaper while the  
mother does some sewing,  
in short they while away  
the time
- 21.45 The father and the mother  
go and brush their teeth in  
the BATHROOM
- 22.00 The father and the mother  
go to bed in their BEDROOM

You will notice that in this model, which, I would stress, is both fictional and problematic, though I'm convinced of its elementary rightness (no one lives exactly like that, of course, but it is nevertheless like that, and not otherwise, that architects and town planners see us as living or want us to live), you will notice then, that, on the one hand, the sitting-room and bedroom are of hardly any more importance than the broom closet (the vacuum cleaner goes into the broom closet; exhausted bodies into the bedroom: the two functions are the same, of recuperation and maintenance) and, on the other hand, that my model would not be modified in any practical way if, instead of having, as here, spaces separated by partitions delimiting a bedroom, a sitting-room, a dining-room, a kitchen, etc., we envisaged, as is often done these days, a purportedly single, pseudo-modular space (living-room, sitting-room, etc.). We would then have, not a kitchen but a cooking-area, not a bedroom but a sleeping-area, not a dining-room but an eating-area.

It's not hard to imagine an apartment whose layout would depend, no longer on the activities of the day, but on functional relationships is between the rooms. That after all was how the so-called reception rooms were divided up ideally in the large town houses of the eighteenth century or the great bourgeois apartments of the *fin de siècle*: a sequence of drawing-rooms en suite, leading off a large vestibule, whose specification rested on minimal variations all revolving around the notion of reception: large drawing-room, small drawing-room, Monsieur's study, Madame's boudoir, smoking-room, library, billiard-room, etc.

It takes a little more imagination no doubt to picture an apartment whose layout was based on the functioning of the senses. We can imagine well enough what a gustatorium might be, or an auditory, but one might wonder what a seeery might look like, or an smellery or a feelery.

It is hardly any more transgressive to conceive of a division

based, no longer on circadian, but on heptadian rhythms.<sup>1</sup> This would give us apartments of seven rooms, known respectively as the Mondayery, Tuesdayery, Wednesdayery, Thursdayery, Fridayery, Saturdayery, and Sundayery. These two last rooms, it should be observed, already exist in abundance, commercialized under the name of 'second' or 'weekend homes'. It's no more foolish to conceive of a room exclusively devoted to Mondays than to build villas that are only *used* for sixty days in the year. The Mondayery could ideally be a laundry-room (our country forebears did their washing on Mondays) and the Tuesdayery a drawing-room (our urban forebears were happy to receive visitors on Tuesdays). This, obviously, would hardly be a departure from the functional. It would be better, while we're at it, to imagine a thematic arrangement, roughly analogous to that which used to exist in brothels (after they were shut down, and until the fifties, they were turned into student hostels; several of my friends thus lived in a former '*maison*' in the Rue de l'Arcade, one in the 'torture chamber', another in the 'aeroplane' [bed shaped like a cockpit, fake portholes, etc.], a third in the 'trapper's cabin' [walls papered with fake logs, etc.]). The Mondayery, for example, would imitate a boat: you would sleep in hammocks, swab down the floor and eat fish. The Tuesdayery, why not, would commemorate one of Man's great victories over Nature, the discovery of the Pole (North or South, to choice), or the ascent of Everest: the room wouldn't be heated, you would sleep under thick furs, the diet would be based on pemmican (corned beef at the end of the month, dried beef when you're flush). The Wednesdayery would glorify children, obviously, being the day on which, for a long time now, they haven't had to go to school; it could be a sort of Dame Tartine's

1. A habitat based on a circa-annual rhythm exists among a few of the 'happy few' who are sufficiently well endowed with residences to be able to attempt to reconcile their sense of values, their liking for travel, climatic conditions and cultural imperatives. They are to be found, for example, in Mexico in January, in Switzerland in February, in Venice in March, in Marrakesh in April, in Paris in May, in Cyprus in June, in Bayreuth in July, in the Dordogne in August, in Scotland in September, in Rome in October, on the Côte d'Azur in November, and in London in December.

Palace,\* gingerbread walls, furniture made from plasticine, etc.

4

*A space without a use*

I have several times tried to think of an apartment in which there would be a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It wouldn't be a junkroom, it wouldn't be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing.

For all my efforts, I found it impossible to follow this idea through to the end. Language itself, seemingly, proved unsuited to describing this nothing, this void, as if we could only speak of what is full, useful and functional.

A space without a function. Not 'without any precise function' but precisely without any function; not pluri-functional (everyone knows how to do that), but a-functional. It wouldn't obviously be a space intended solely to 'release' the others (lumber-room, cupboard, hanging space, storage space, etc.) but a space, I repeat, that would serve no purpose at all.

I sometimes manage to think of nothing, not even, like Raymond Queneau's Ami Pierrot,<sup>†</sup> of the death of Louis XVI. All of a sudden I realize I am here, that the Métro train has just stopped and that, having left Dugommier some ninety seconds before, I am now well and truly at Daumesnil. But, in the event, I haven't succeeded in thinking of nothing. How does one think of nothing? How to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole, into which one will hasten to put something, an activity, a function, a destiny, a gaze, a need, a lack, a surplus . . . ?

I have tried to follow wherever this limp idea led me. I have

\*The reference is to a well-known French *comptine*, or nursery rhyme.

†In a novel called *Pierrot mon ami*.

encountered many unusable spaces and many unused spaces. But I wanted neither the unusable nor the unused, but the useless. How to expel functions, rhythms, habits, how to expel necessity? I imagined myself living in a vast apartment, so vast that I could never remember how many rooms it had (I had known, in the old days, but had forgotten, and knew I was too old now to start again on such a complicated enumeration). All the rooms, except one, were used for something. The whole point was to find this last room. It was no harder, when all's said and done, than for the readers in Borges's story of the 'Library of Babel' to find the book that held the key to all the others. Indeed, there is something almost vertiginously Borgesian in trying to imagine a room reserved for listening to Haydn's Symphony Number 48 in C, the so-called Maria Theresa, another devoted to reading the barometer or to cleaning my right big toe.

I thought of old Prince Bolkonsky who, in his anxiety as to the fate of his son, vainly searches all night long, from room to room, torch in hand, followed by his servant Tikhon carrying fur blankets, for the bed where he will be able finally to get to sleep. I thought of a science-fiction novel in which the very notion of habitat has vanished. I thought of another Borges story ('The Immortals'), in which men no longer inhabited by the need to live and to die have built ruined palaces and unusable staircases. I thought of engravings by Escher and paintings by Magritte. I thought of a gigantic Skinner's Box: a bedroom entirely hung in black, a solitary switch on the wall, by pressing which you can make something like a grey Maltese cross appear for a brief flash against a white background; I thought of the Great Pyramids and the church interiors of Saenredam;\* I thought of something Japanese. I thought of the vague memory I had of a text by Heissenbüttel in which the narrator discovers a room without either doors or windows. I thought of the dreams I had had on this very subject, discovering a room I didn't know about in my own apartment.

I never managed anything that was really satisfactory. But I

\*A Dutch painter (1597-1665).

don't think I was altogether wasting my time in trying to go beyond this improbable limit. The effort itself seemed to produce something that might be a statute of the inhabitable.

## 5

*Moving out*

Leaving an apartment. Vacating the scene. Decamping. Clearing up. Clearing out.

Making an inventory tidying up sorting out going through  
Eliminating throwing away palming off on

Breaking

Burning

Taking down unfastening unnailling unsticking unscrewing  
unhooking

Unplugging detaching cutting pulling dismantling folding  
up cutting off

Rolling up

Wrapping up packing away strapping up tying piling up  
assembling heaping up fastening wrapping protecting covering  
surrounding locking

Removing carrying lifting

Sweeping

Closing

Leaving

*Moving in*

cleaning checking trying out changing fitting signing waiting  
imagining inventing investing deciding bending folding  
stooping sheathing fitting out stripping bare splitting turning  
returning beating muttering rushing at kneading lining up  
protecting covering over mixing ripping out slicing connecting  
hiding setting going activating installing botching up sizing  
breaking threading filtering tamping cramming sharpening

polishing making firm driving in pinning together hanging up  
 arranging sawing fixing pinning up marking noting working  
 out climbing measuring mastering seeing surveying pressing  
 hard down on priming rubbing down painting rubbing scrap-  
 ingconnecting climbing stumbling straddling mislaying finding  
 again rummaging around getting nowhere brushing puttying  
 stripping camouflaging puttying adjusting coming and going  
 putting a gloss on allowing to dry admiring being surprised  
 getting worked up growing impatient suspending judgment  
 assessing adding up inserting sealing nailing screwing bolting  
 sewing crouching perching moping centring reaching washing  
 laundering evaluating reckoning smiling main taining sub-  
 tracting multiplying kicking your heels roughing out buying  
 acquiring receiving bringing back unpacking undoing edging  
 framing rivetting observing considering musing fixing scoop-  
 ing out wiping down the plaster camping out going thoroughly  
 into raising procuring sitting down leaning against bracing  
 yourself rinsing out unblocking completing sorting sweeping  
 sighing whistling while you work moistening becoming very  
 keen on pulling off sticking up glueing swearing insisting  
 tracing rubbing down brushing painting drilling plugging in  
 switching on starting up soldering bending unfixing sharpening  
 aiming dillydallying shortening supporting shaking before  
 using grinding going into raptures touching up botching  
 scraping dusting manoeuvring pulverising balancing checking  
 moistening stopping up emptying crushing roughing out  
 explaining shrugging fitting the handle on dividing up walking  
 up and down tightening timing juxtaposing bringing together  
 matching whitewashing varnishing replacing the top insulating  
 assessing pinning up arranging distempering hanging up  
 starting again inserting spreading out washing looking for  
 entering breathing hard  
 settling in  
 living in  
 living

## Doors

We protect ourselves, we barricade ourselves in. Doors stop and separate.

The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. On one side, me and *my place*, the private, the domestic (a space overfilled with my possessions: my bed, my carpet, my table, my typewriter, my books, my odd copies of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*); on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics. You can't simply let yourself slide from one into the other, can't pass from one to the other, neither in one direction nor in the other. You have to have the password, have to cross the threshold, have to show your credentials, have to communicate, just as the prisoner communicates with the world outside.

From the triangular shape and phenomenal size of the doors in the film of *Forbidden Planet*, you can deduce some of the morphological characteristics of their very ancient builders. The idea is as spectacular as it is gratuitous (why triangular?), but if there hadn't been any doors at all, we would have been able to draw far more startling conclusions.

How to be specific? It's not a matter of opening or not opening the door, not a matter of 'leaving the key in the door'. The problem isn't whether or not there are keys: if there wasn't a door, there wouldn't be a key.

It's hard obviously to imagine a house which doesn't have a door. I saw one one day, several years ago, in Lansing, Michigan. It had been built by Frank Lloyd Wright. You began by following a gently winding path to the left of which there rose up, very gradually, with an extreme nonchalance even, a slight declivity that was oblique to start with but which slowly approached the vertical. Bit by bit, as if by chance, without thinking, without your having any right at any given moment to declare that you had remarked anything like a transition, an interruption, a passage, a break in continuity, the path became stony, that's to say that at

first there was only grass, then there began to be stones in the middle of the grass, then there were a few more stones and it became like a paved, grassy walkway, while on your left, the slope of the ground began to resemble, very vaguely, a low wall, then a wall made of crazy paving. Then there appeared something like an open-work roof that was practically indissociable from the vegetation that had invaded it. In actual fact, it was already too late to know whether you were indoors or out. At the end of the path, the paving stones were set edge to edge and you found yourself in what is customarily called an entrance-hall, which opened directly on to a fairly enormous room that ended in one direction on a terrace graced by a large swimming-pool. The rest of the house was no less remarkable, not only for its comfort, its luxury even, but because you had the impression that it had slid on to its hillside like a cat curling itself up in a cushion.

The punch line of this anecdote is as moral as it is predictable. A dozen more or less similar houses were scattered through the surrounds of a private golf club. The course was entirely closed off. Guards who it was all too easy to imagine as being armed with sawn-off shotguns (I saw lots of American movies in my youth) were on duty at the one entrance gate.

### *Staircases*

We don't think enough about staircases.

Nothing was more beautiful in old houses than the staircases. Nothing is uglier, colder, more hostile, meaner, in today's apartment buildings.

We should learn to live more on staircases. But how?

### *Walls*

'Granted there is a wall, what's going on behind it?'

Jean Tardieu

I put a picture up on a wall. Then I forget there is a wall. I no longer know what there is behind this wall, I no longer know there is a wall, I no longer know this wall is a wall, I no longer know what a wall is. I no longer know that in my apartment there are walls, and that if there weren't any walls, there would be no apartment. The wall is no longer what delimits and defines the place where I live, that which separates it from the other places where other people live, it is nothing more than a support for the picture. But I also forget the picture, I no longer look at it, I no longer know how to look at it. I have put the picture on the wall so as to forget there was a wall, but in forgetting the wall, I forget the picture, too. There are pictures because there are walls. We have to be able to forget there are walls, and have found no better way to do that than pictures. Pictures efface walls. But walls kill pictures. So we need continually to be changing, either the wall or the picture, to be forever putting other pictures up on the walls, or else constantly moving the picture from one wall to another.

We could write on our walls (as we sometimes write on the fronts of houses, on fences round building sites and on the walls of prisons), but we do it only very rarely.

## The Apartment Building

1

### Project for a novel

I imagine a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed – a sort of equivalent to the roof that is lifted off in *Le Diable boiteux*, or to the scene with the game of go in *The Tale of Genji* – so that all the rooms in the front, from the ground floor up to the attics, are instantly and simultaneously visible.

The novel – whose title is *Life a User's Manual* – restricts itself (if I dare use that verb for a project that will finally extend to something like four hundred pages) to describing the rooms thus unveiled and the activities unfolding in them, the whole in accordance with formal procedures which it doesn't seem necessary to go into here in detail, but the mere stating of which seems to me rather alluring: a polygraph of the moves made by a chess knight (adapted, what's more, to a board of 10 squares by 10), a pseudo-queenine of order 10, an orthogonal Latin bi-square of order 10 (the one that Euler conjectured didn't exist, but which was demonstrated in 1960 by Bose, Parker and Shrikhande).\*

This project has more than one source. One is a drawing by Saul Steinberg that appeared in *The Art of Living* (1952) and

\*This obscure formula describes the complex structure underlying the multiple (to say the least) narratives of Perec's wonderful novel, *Life a User's Manual*. A 'bi-square' is an elaboration on the familiar 'magic square' in which no number recurs and in which all the rows and columns add up to the same total. In a 'bi-square' each space or location is occupied by two elements instead of just one: e.g. by a letter of the alphabet as well as a number or by two numbers drawn from independent series. Perec's 'bi-square' has ten locations in each direction and thus is 'of order 10'. A 'queenine' is a mathematical formula invented as a formal constraint in the writing of poetry by Raymond Queneau – hence its name. A fuller description of these devices can be found in David Bellos's *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*.

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 has been removed, allowing you to see the interior of some twenty-three rooms (I say 'some' because you can also see through into some of the back rooms). The mere inventory – and it could never be exhaustive – of the items of furniture and the actions represented has something truly vertiginous about it:

- 3 bathrooms. The one on the third floor is empty, in the one on the second, a woman is taking a bath; in the one on the ground floor, a man is having a shower.
- 3 fireplaces, varying greatly in size, but all on the one axis. None of them is working (no one has lit a fire in them, if you prefer). The ones on the first and second floors are equipped with fire-dogs; the one on the first floor is split into two by a partition which also divides the mouldings and the ceiling rose.
- 6 candelabra and one Calder-style mobile
- 5 telephones
- 1 upright piano with stool
- 10 adult individuals of the male sex, of whom
  - 1 is having a drink
  - 1 is typing
  - 2 are reading the newspaper, one sitting in an armchair, the other stretched out on a divan
  - 3 are asleep
  - 1 is having a shower
  - 1 is eating toast
  - 1 is coming through the doorway into a room where there is a dog
- 10 adult individuals of the female sex, of whom
  - 1 is doing her chores
  - 1 is sitting down
  - 1 is holding a baby in her arms
  - 2 are reading, one, sitting down, the newspaper, the other, lying down, a novel
  - 1 is doing the washing-up



- 1 is having a bath
- 1 is knitting
- 1 is eating toast
- 1 is sleeping
- 6 young children, 2 of whom are certainly little girls and 2 certainly little boys
- 2 dogs
- 2 cats
- 1 bear on wheels
- 1 small horse on wheels
- 1 toy train
- 1 doll in a pram
- 6 rats or mice
- a fair number of termites. (it's not certain they are termites; the sorts of animals in any case that live in floorboards and walls)
- at least 38 pictures or framed engravings
- 1 negro mask
- 29 lights (over and above the candelabra)
- 10 beds
- 1 child's cot
- 3 divans, one of which serves uncomfortably as a bed
- 4 kitchens or rather kitchenettes
- 7 rooms with parquet flooring
- 1 carpet
- 2 bedside rugs or mats
- 9 rooms where the floor is no doubt covered with moquette
- 3 rooms with tiled floors
- 1 interior staircase
- 8 pedestal tables
- 5 coffee tables
- 5 small bookcases
- 1 shelf full of books
- 2 clocks
- 5 chests of drawers
- 2 tables
- 1 desk with drawers with blotting-pad and inkwell
- 2 pairs of shoes

- 1 bathroom stool
- 11 upright chairs
- 2 armchairs
- 1 leather briefcase
- 1 dressing gown
- 1 hanging cupboard
- 1 alarm clock
- 1 pair of bathroom scales
- 1 pedal bin
- 1 hat hanging on a peg
- 1 suit hanging on a hanger
- 1 jacket hanging on the back of a chair
- washing drying
- 3 small bathroom cabinets
- several bottles and flasks
- numerous objects hard to identify (carriage clocks, ashtrays, spectacles, glasses, saucers full of peanuts, for example)

Which is to describe only the 'defacaded' part of the building. The remaining quarter of the drawing enables us to register a section of pavement strewn with rubbish (old newspaper, tin can, three envelopes), an overflowing dustbin, a porch, once luxurious now tatty, and five figures at the windows: on the second floor, amidst potplants, an old man smoking his pipe with his dog, on the third floor, a bird in its cage, a woman and a young girl.

I fancy it is summertime. It must be something like eight o' clock in the evening (it's odd that the children aren't in bed). Television hasn't been invented yet. There's not a single radio set to be seen either. The owner of the building is no doubt the woman who is knitting (she isn't on the first floor, as I first of all thought, but, in view of the position of the porch, on the ground floor, and what I've been calling the ground floor is in fact a basement — the house has only two storeys). She has fallen on hard times and has been forced, not only to turn her house into a rooming-house, but to divide her best rooms into two.

Examine the drawing a bit more closely and the details of a

voluminous novel could easily be extracted from it. It's obvious, for example, that we are at a time when the fashion is for curly hair (three women have curlers in). The gentleman asleep on his uncomfortable divan is no doubt a teacher; the leather briefcase belongs to him and on his desk he has something that looks very much like a pile of school exercises. The woman doing her chores is the mother of the girl who is sitting down and it's extremely likely that the gentleman leaning on the mantelpiece, a glass in his hand and looking somewhat perplexedly at the Calder-style mobile, is her future son-in-law. As for her neighbour, who has four children and a cat, he seems to be slaving away at his typewriter like someone whose manuscript the publisher has been waiting for the past three weeks.

## 2

*Things we ought to do systematically, from time to time*

In the building you live in:

go and call on your neighbours; look at what there is on the party wall, for example; confirm, or belie, the homotopology of the accommodation. See what use they have made of it;

notice how unfamiliar things may come to seem as a result of taking staircase B instead of staircase A, or of going up to the fifth floor when you live on the second;

try to imagine on what a collective existence might be based, within the confines of this same building. (In an old house in the 18th arrondissement I saw a WC that was shared by four tenants. The landlord refused to pay for the lighting of the said WC, and none of the four tenants was willing to pay for the three others, or had accepted the idea of a single meter and a bill divisible into four. So the WC was lit by four separate bulbs, each controlled by one of the four tenants. A single bulb

burning night and day for ten years would have obviously been less expensive than installing a single one of these exclusive circuits.)

In apartment buildings in general:

look closely at them;

look upwards;

look for the name of the architect, the name of the contractor, the date when it was built;

ask yourself why it often says 'gas on every floor';

in the case of a new building, try to remember what was there before;

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  $12 \times 12$  square as opposed to one  $10 \times 10$ .

## *The Neighbourhood*

### 1

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

same butcher's, leave your parcels at the *épicerie*, open an account at the ironmonger's, call the pharmacist by her first name, entrust your cat to the woman who sells newspapers, but it wouldn't work, it still wouldn't make a life, couldn't even give the illusion of being a life. It would create a familiar space, would give rise to an itinerary (leave home, go and buy the evening paper, a packet of cigarettes, a packet of soap powder, a kilo of cherries, etc.), a pretext for a few limp handshakes (morning Madame Chamissac, morning Monsieur Fernand, morning Mademoiselle Jeanne), but that would only ever be putting a mawkish face on necessity, a way of dressing up commercialism.

Obviously, you could start an orchestra, or put on street theatre. Bring the neighbourhood alive, as they say. Weld the people of a street or a group of streets together by something more than a mere connivance: by making demands on them, making them fight.

### *Death of the neighbourhood*

This too is a very big word

(many other things are dying after all: towns, the countryside, etc.).

What I miss above all is the neighbourhood cinema, with its ghastly advertisements for the dry cleaner's on the corner.

## 2

From all of the foregoing I can draw the, truth to tell, less than satisfying conclusion that I have only a very approximate idea of what a neighbourhood is. It's true that in recent years I've changed neighbourhoods quite a few times; I haven't had time to get properly used to one.

I make little use of my neighbourhood. It's only by chance that some of my friends live in the same neighbourhood as I do. Relative to my dwelling-place, my main centres of interest are

somewhat eccentric. I have nothing against the act of moving, quite the reverse.

Why not set a higher value on dispersal? Instead of living in just one place, and trying in vain to gather yourself together there, why not have five or six rooms dotted about Paris? I'd go and sleep in Denfert, I'd write in the Place Voltaire, I'd listen to music in the Place Clichy, I'd make love at the Poterne des Peupliers,\* I'd eat in the Rue de la Tombe-Issoire, I'd read by the Parc Monceau, etc. Is that any more foolish, when all's said and done, than putting all the furniture shops in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, all the glassware shops in the Rue de Paradis, all the tailors in the Rue du Sentier, all the Jews in the Rue des Rosiers, all the students in the Latin Quarter, all the publishers in Saint-Sulpice, all the doctors in Harley Street, all the blacks in Harlem?

\*A leafy spot in the 13th arrondissement.

...so that the world and space seemed to be the mirror one of the other both minutely storied in hieroglyphs and ideograms, and each of them could equally well be or not be a sign: a calcareous concretion on basalt, a ridge raised by the wind on the coagulated sand of the desert, the arrangement of the eyes in the feathers of the peacock (living in the midst of signs had very slowly brought us to see as so many signs the innumerable things that had at first been there without indicating anything but their own presence, it had transformed them into signs of themselves, and had added them to the series of signs deliberately made by whoever wanted to make a sign), the streaks of fire against a wall of schist, the four hundred and twenty-seventh groove – slightly askew – in the cornice on the pediment of a mausoleum, a sequence of streaks on a screen during a magnetic storm (the series of signs multiplied itself into the series of signs of signs, of signs repeated an innumerable number of times, always the same and always in some way different, for to the sign made on purpose was added the sign fallen there by chance), the badly inked downstroke of the letter R that in a copy of an evening paper had met with a flaw in the fibres of the newsprint, one scratch out of eight hundred thousand on the creosoted wall between two docks in Melbourne, the curve of a statistical graph, brakes being suddenly applied on tarmac, a chromosome ...

Italo Calvino, *Cosmicomics*

## Space

We use our eyes for seeing. Our field of vision reveals a limited space, something vaguely circular, which ends very quickly to left and right, and doesn't extend very far up or down. If we squint, we can manage to see the end of our nose; if we raise our eyes, we can see there's an up, if we lower them, we can see there's a down. If we turn our head in one direction, then in another, we don't even manage to see completely everything there is around us; we have to twist our bodies round to see properly what was behind us.

Our gaze travels through space and gives us the illusion of relief and distance. That is how we construct space, with an up and a down, a left and a right, an in front and a behind, a near and a far.

When nothing arrests our gaze, it carries a very long way. But if it meets with nothing, it sees nothing, it sees only what it meets. Space is what arrests our gaze, what our sight stumbles over: the obstacle, bricks, an angle, a vanishing point. Space is when it makes an angle, when it stops, when we have to turn for it to start off again. There's nothing ectoplasmic about space; it has edges, it doesn't go off in all directions, it does all that needs to be done for railway lines to meet well short of infinity.

## On Straight Lines

If I mend at this rate, it is not impossible ... but I may arrive hereafter at the excellency of going on even thus:

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which is a line drawn as straight as I could draw it by a writing-master's ruler ...

This *right line*, – the path-way for Christians to walk in! say Divines, –  
 – The emblem of moral rectitude! says Cicero, –  
 – The *best line*! say cabbage planters, – is the shortest line, says Archimedes, which can be drawn from one given point to another.

Lawrence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

### Measures

Like everyone else, I presume, I feel an attraction for zero points, for the axes and points of reference from which the positions and distances of any object in the universe can be determined:

- the Equator
- the Greenwich Meridian
- sea-level

or the circle on the parvis in front of Notre-Dame (it disappeared, alas, when they were making the carpark and no one has thought to put it back) from which all French distances by road were calculated.

When going from Tunis to Sfax, I used to like passing the sign (it, too, has since vanished) which showed how far it was to Tripoli, Benghazi, Alexandria and Cairo.

I like knowing that Pierre-François-André Méchain, born in Laon in 1744, and Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Delambre, born in Amiens in 1749, went from Dunkirk to Barcelona with the sole object of verifying how long a metre had to be (it seems that Méchain made a mistake in his calculations).

I like knowing that midway between the hamlets of Frapon and La Presle, in the commune of Vesdun, in the department of the Cher, a plaque is to be found indicating that you are at the exact *centre* of metropolitan France.

Right here, at this moment, it wouldn't be altogether impossible for me to determine my position in degrees, minutes, seconds, tenths and hundredths of a second: somewhere in the region of 49° north latitude, somewhere in the region of 2° 10' 14.4" east of Greenwich (or only a few fractions of a second west of the Paris meridian), and a few dozen metres above sea-level.

I read recently that a letter had been posted in England whose only address was a latitude and longitude. The sender, obviously, was, if not a geographer, then at least a surveyor or mapmaker, and it's true that the addressee lived on his own in a house sufficiently isolated to be identifiable. The fact remains that the letter arrived. The Postmaster-General, the British equivalent of our own Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, issued a statement in which he expressed the high esteem in which he held his postmen, but warned that in future such forms of address would not be accepted. The same goes for addresses written in verse; postmen have better things to do than solve riddles. The path a letter follows from its point of departure to its point of arrival is a strictly coded affair; Mallarmé, Latis\* or cartography can only produce 'noise'.

Space seems to be either tamer or more inoffensive than time; we're forever meeting people who have watches, very seldom people who have compasses. We always need to know what time it is (who still knows how to deduce it from the position of the sun?) but we never ask ourselves where we are. We think we know: we are at home, at our office, in the Métro, in the street.

That of course is obvious – but then what isn't obvious? Now and again, however, we ought to ask ourselves where exactly we are, to take our bearings, not only concerning our state of mind, our everyday health, our ambitions, our beliefs and our *raisons d'être*, but simply concerning our topographical position, not so much in relation to the axes cited above, but rather in relation to a place or a person we are thinking about, or that we shall thus start thinking about. For example, when you get into the coach at the Invalides air terminal to go to Orly, picture the person you're going to meet passing directly above Grenoble, and try, as the coach makes its way with difficulty through the traffic jams in the Avenue de Maine, to imagine his slow progress across a map of France, crossing the Ain, the Saône-et-Loire, the Nièvre and the Loiret. Or else, more systematically, interrogate yourself at some precise moment of the day about the positions occupied

\*The pseudonym of Emmanuel Peillet, a philosophy teacher and active member of OuLiPo.

by some of your friends, in relation both to one another and to yourself. List the differences in levels (the ones who, like you, live on the first floor, the ones who live on the fifth, the sixth, etc.), the direction they are facing, imagine their movements through space.

Long ago, like everyone else I presume, and no doubt on one of those little three-month diaries the Librairie Gibert gave away at the start of the autumn term, you went to swap the Carpentier-Fialap and Roux-Combaluzier textbooks of the year before for the Carpentier-Fialap and Roux-Combaluzier of the year ahead, I used to write my address as follows:

Georges Perec  
18, Rue de l'Assomption  
Staircase A  
Third floor  
Right-hand door  
Paris 16e  
Seine  
France  
Europe  
The World  
The Universe

### *playing with space*

Play with large numbers (factorials, Fibonacci series, geometric progressions):

Distance from the Earth to the Moon: a sheet of cigarette paper so fine it would take a thousand of them to make a millimetre, folded in two 49 times in a row;

Distance from the Earth to the Sun: ditto, folded in two 58 times in a row;

Distance from Pluto to the Sun: the same again; by folding it four more times you're just about there, but fold it five more times and you pass Pluto by some 3,000,000,000 kilometres;

Distance from Earth to Alpha Centauri: fifteen more foldings.

Play with distances: prepare a journey that would enable you to visit or pass through all the places that are 314.60 kilometres from your house;

Look up the route you've followed on an atlas or army map.

Play with measurements: reacquaint yourself with feet and leagues (if only to make it easier to read Stendhal, Dumas or Jules Verne); try and get once and for all a clear idea of what a nautical mile is (and by the same token, a knot); remember that a *journal* is a unit of space, it's the surface area a farm labourer can work in a day.

Play with space:

Cause an eclipse of the sun by raising your little finger (as Leopold Bloom does in *Ulysses*).

Have yourself photographed holding up the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Start to get used to living in a state of weightlessness; forget verticals and horizontals: Escher's engravings, the inside of spaceships in 2001: *A Space Odyssey*.

Reflect on these two quite brilliant thoughts (complementary as it happens):

*I often think about how much beef it would take to turn the Lake of Geneva into consommé.* (Pierre Dac, *L'Os à moelle*)

*Elephants are generally drawn smaller than life size, but a flea always larger.* (Jonathan Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*)

*the conquest of space*

1

*M. Raymond Roussel's Mobile Home*(Extract from the *Revue du Touring Club de France*)

The author of *Impressions of Africa*, whose genius has been extolled by so many distinguished minds, has had an automobile 9 metres long by 2.30 wide built to his own design.

This vehicle is a veritable small house. Thanks to the ingenuity of its arrangement, it contains: a sitting-room, a bedroom, a studio, a bathroom, and even a small dormitory for a staff consisting of three men (two chauffeurs and a manservant).

The very elegant coachwork is by Lacoste and its interior layout is as original as it is ingenious . . . In the daytime the bedroom turns into a studio or sitting-room; in the evening the front section (behind the driver's seat) becomes a small bedroom in which the three men referred to above can relax and perform their toilet (there is a wash-basin in the casing to the left of the driver's seat and steering wheel).

The interior decoration of M. Raymond Roussel's mobile home bears the signature of Maple's.

It is heated electrically and has a petroleum gas-stove with flue. The water-heater likewise works off petroleum gas.

The fittings have been planned to meet all requirements. They even include a Fichet safe.

An excellent wireless set enables one to pick up all the European stations.

This description, brief though it is, is enough to show that this veritable mobile villa – to which a kitchen-trailer can be added – allows its owner to rediscover all the comforts of the family home within an only slightly reduced setting.

This luxurious installation is mounted on a Saurer chassis. On the flat, its normal speed is some 40 kilometres an hour. The steepest descents can be tackled without fear thanks to the motor braking system.

The steering has an excellent 'lock', something much to be desired when taking the hairpin bends on mountain roads.

. . . As soon as it was built, the caravan left . . . to effect a 3,000-kilometre

excursion through Switzerland and Alsace. M. Roussel was able to enjoy a fresh horizon each evening.

He has brought back incomparable impressions from his journey.

2

*Saint Jerome in his Study*

by Antonello da Messina (National Gallery, London)

The study is a piece of wooden furniture standing on the tiled floor of a cathedral. It rests on a dais which is reached by three steps and consists mainly of six compartments filled with books and various other objects (boxes chiefly and a vase), and a working surface the flat part of which supports two books, an inkwell and a quill, and the sloping part the book that the saint is in the midst of reading. All its elements are fixed, i.e. constitute the piece of furniture as such, but on the dais also are a chair, the one on which the saint is sitting, and a chest.

The saint has taken his shoes off in order to mount the dais. He has put his cardinal's hat down on the chest. He is dressed in a (cardinal) red robe and wears a sort of skullcap, also red, on his head. He sits very upright on his chair, and a long way from the book he is reading. His fingers have slipped inside the pages as if he were either only leafing through the book, or rather as if he had a frequent need to refer back to passages he has read earlier. On top of one of the shelves, facing the saint and high above him, there stands a tiny crucifix.

On one side of the shelves are fixed two austere hooks, one of which bears an item of clothing that may be an amice or a stole, but is more likely a towel.

On a projection of the dais are two potted plants, one of which might be a dwarf orange-tree, and a small tabby cat whose position gives one to suppose it is dozing. Above the orange-tree, on the panel of the worktop, a label is fixed, as nearly always with Antonello da Messina, giving the artist's name and the date when the picture was painted.

On either side and above the study, you can get an idea of the rest



of the cathedral. It is empty, with the exception of a lion, on the right, which, with one paw raised, seems to be hesitating whether to come and disturb the saint at his work. Seven birds are framed in the tall, narrow upper windows. Through the lower windows can be seen a countryside of low hills, a cypress tree, olive trees, a castle, a river with two people in a boat and three fishermen.

The whole is seen from a vast ogival opening on the sill of which a peacock and a very young bird of prey are obligingly perched next to a magnificent copper basin.

The whole space is organized around *the piece of furniture* (and the whole of the piece of furniture is organized around the book). The glacial architecture of the church (the bareness of the tiling, the hostility of the piers) has been cancelled out. Its perspectives and its vertical lines have ceased to delimit the site simply of an ineffable faith; they are there solely to lend scale to the piece of furniture, to enable it to be *inscribed*; Surrounded by the uninhabitable, the study defines a domesticated space inhabited with serenity by cats, books and men.

## 3

*The Escaped Prisoner*

'Thus you think you can see a bridge galloping'

Jacques Roubaud

I've forgotten where this anecdote came from, I can't guarantee its authenticity and I'm far from being certain as to the accuracy of its terminology. Nevertheless, it seems to me to illustrate my purpose admirably.

A French prisoner of war succeeded in escaping in the middle of the night from the train that was taking him to Germany. The night was pitch black. The prisoner was wholly ignorant of his whereabouts. He walked for a long time at random, i.e. straight ahead. At a certain moment he came to the banks of a river. There was the moan of a siren. A few seconds later, the waves raised by the passing boat came and broke on the bank. From the time

separating the moan of the siren from the splashing of the waves, the escapee deduced the width of the river. Knowing how wide it was, he identified it (it was the Rhine) and having identified it, knew where he was.

## 4

*Meetings*

It would be quite senseless obviously if it were otherwise. Everything has been studied, been worked out, there's no question of getting it wrong, no known case of an error being detected, even of a few centimetres, even of a few millimetres.

Yet I still feel something like amazement when I think of the French and Italian workmen meeting in the middle of the Mont Cenis tunnel.

*The Uninhabitable*

The uninhabitable: seas used as a dump, coastlines bristling with barbed wire, earth bare of vegetation, mass graves, piles of carcasses, boggy rivers, towns that smell bad

The uninhabitable: the architecture of contempt or display, the vainglorious mediocrity of tower blocks, thousands of rabbit hutches piled one above the other, the cutprize ostentation of company headquarters

The uninhabitable: the skimped, the airless, the small, the mean, the shrunken, the very precisely calculated

The uninhabitable: the confined, the out-of-bounds, the encaged, the bolted, walls jagged with broken glass, judas windows, reinforced doors

The uninhabitable: shanty towns, townships

The hostile, the grey, the anonymous, the ugly, the corridors of the Métro, public baths, hangars, car parks, marshalling yards, ticket windows, hotel bedrooms

factories, barracks, prisons, asylums, old people's homes, lycées, law courts, school playgrounds

space-saving private properties, converted attics, superb bachelor pads, fashionable studio flats in leafy surroundings, elegant pieds-à-terre, triple reception rooms, vast homes in the sky, unbeatable view, double aspect, trees, beams, character, luxurious designer conversion, balcony, telephone, sunlight, hallway, real fireplace, loggia, double (stainless steel) sink, peace and quiet, exclusive small garden, exceptional value

You are asked to give your name after 10 p.m.

Embellishment:

39533/43/Kam/J

6 November 1943

Objective: to assemble the plants for the purpose of providing a border of greenery for the camp's Nos 1 and 2 crematorium ovens. Ref: Conversation between SS-Obersturmbannführer Höss, Camp Commandant, and Sturmbannführer Bishoff.

To SS-Sturmbannführer Ceasar, Head of Agricultural Services in the Concentration Camp of Auschwitz (Upper Silesia).

In conformity with an order from SS-Obersturmbannführer Höss, Camp Commandant, Nos 1 and 2 crematorium ovens in the camp will be provided with a green border serving as a natural boundary to the camp.

The following is a list of the plants needing to be drawn from our stocks of trees:

200 trees in leaf from three to five metres high; 100 tree shoots in leaf from a metre and a half to four metres high; lastly, 1,000 bushes for use as lining from one to two and a half metres high, all to come from the stocks in our nurseries.

You are requested to place these supplies of plants at our disposal.  
Head of the Central Building Directorate of  
the Waffen SS and the Police at Auschwitz.  
Signed: SS-Obersturmführer  
(quoted by David Rousset, *Le Pitre ne rit pas*, 1948)

### *Space (Continuation and End)*

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin:

My birthplace, the cradle of my family, the house where I may have been born, the tree I may have seen grow (that my father may have planted the day I was born), the attic of my childhood filled with intact memories . . .

Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.

My spaces are fragile: time is going to wear them away, to destroy them. Nothing will any longer resemble what was, my memories will betray me, oblivion will infiltrate my memory, I shall look at a few old yellowing photographs with broken edges without recognizing them. The words '*Phone directory available within*' or '*Snacks served at any hour*' will no longer be written up in a semi-circle in white porcelain letters on the window of the little café in the Rue Coquillière.

Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds:

To write: 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.

PARIS 1973-1974

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