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Pretzel

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W, or the Memory of Childhood
by Georges Perec, translated by David Bellos.
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Life: A User's Manual
by Georges Perec, translated by David Bellos.
Collins Harvill, 581 pp., £14.95, October 1988, 0 00 272999 1

These are the first of Georges Perec's wonderful and extraordinary writings to be translated into English. Perec has been a household name in France since the runaway success of his first and most popular novel, *Les Choses* (1965), which still sells twenty thousand copies a year. *Les Choses* describes, with a sociological exactitude justified in the novel's concluding quotation from Marx, the motivations and disappointments of an utterly ordinary middle-class couple in a consumerist culture. Sylvie and Jérôme are both public opinion analysts, as indeed was Perec at the time: they emerge as a kind of generically rootless Parisian couple of the Sixties, whose experiences and emotions are such that no one of that generation could help but identify with them. The book ties in neatly with, indeed was partly inspired by, Barthes's theories on the language of publicity, which were appearing around the same time; its precision and syntactical ingenuity aspire to Flaubert, a major figure in Perec's pantheon of favourite authors.

Until recently in England Perec was simply known as the crazy writer who first wrote a book without any e's in it, *La Disparition* (1969), and then one with e's but no other vowels, *Les Revenentes* (1972). (One's heart goes out to the translators of those two.) Both books certainly establish benchmarks in the virtuosity with which they sustain themselves within the most severe of Oulipian constraints. OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) was a literary association founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in 1960 and dedicated to the search for new forms of writing, mainly through the application of mathematical structures, gratuitous forms of word play, and bizarre constrictions on content. The Oulipian text aims for a state of absolute paradox, at once wilfully arbitrary in the rules imposed at its conception, and slavishly obedient to the internal logic arising from their fulfilment. Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*, Harry Mathews's *Tlooth* and *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* (both translated into French by Perec), Queneau's *Exercises in Style* are striking examples of what may be achieved in the mode. Perec joined in 1967 as the group's youngest member, but

one of its most inventive. He excelled in composing bilingual poems, palindromes (his longest is five thousand letters long), *exercices d'homosyntaxisme* (in which a text must be written to a formula that predetermines the number of its words and the order of its verbs, substantives and adjectives), and in heterogrammatic poetry. 'Ulcérations' is a good instance of the latter, a poem written using only the letters of its title, which also happen to be the 11 most frequently used letters in the alphabet. 'Alphabets' is an even more prodigious feat; each of its 26 sections of 11 poems is written using only the ten most frequent letters – that is, a, e, i, l, n, o, r, s, t, u – plus one variable letter. In the first 11 poems the variable letter is b, the next c, and so on through to z. In other poems the vowels used are not allowed to deviate from the strict order of a, e, i, o, u – *A demi-mot un art chétif nous parle*, and so on. In an interview with *L'Arc* magazine Perec revealed he treated such exercises as a wordsmith's equivalent of a pianist's scales, and found in their intense difficulty nothing compared to the horrors attendant upon any attempt to write poetry freely.

Practically all of Perec's texts are constructed, with varying degrees of extremity, in this kind of pre-programmed way. *Un homme qui dort* is written entirely in the second person. *Je me souviens* is fabricated out of sentences all beginning *Je me souviens*, followed by some randomly chosen remembrance. *La Boutique Obscure* relates 124 dreams Perec had over a period of years. (In a particularly harrowing one he dreams he finds first one e, and then two, then 20, then 1000 in the text of *La Disparition*.) *Life: A User's Manual* describes the contents and inhabitants of a Parisian apartment block at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier. The block is ten storeys high and ten units wide, and the order in which the apartments are treated is determined by the route a knight at chess would have to take to cover all the squares on a ten x ten chessboard without alighting on the same square twice. Perec decided on the 42 constituent elements of each chapter, including references in each to three of the 30 authors systematically alluded to throughout the book, via a particularly complex mathematical algorithm. It's in *Life* in particular that Perec most exhaustively exploits the eccentric compositional techniques invented by another of his great heroes, Raymond Roussel.

Perec's obsession with autistic, self-propagating literary forms of this kind, which implicitly reject all preconceptions of depth and significance, is wholly compatible with Post-Modernism's ideal of literature as a self-reflexive surface, a field of clues that reveal nothing beyond their internal chance coherences. *La Boutique Obscure* ends with a quote from his close friend Harry Mathews's *Tlooth*: 'for the labyrinth leads nowhere but out of itself.' *La Disparition* more bleakly talks of an enigma that will destroy us whether it is solved or not. But Perec's own adherence to this idea of literature as a self-sustaining puzzle, a teasing game between writer and reader, developed also, as he most clearly explains in the autobiographical chapters of *W*, in response to the circumstances of his own childhood.

Both sides of Perec's family were Polish Jews who emigrated to Paris during the Twenties. His father's name was Icek Judko Peretz; but in France he became known as André Perec. (Peretz in Hungarian means 'pretzel'; in a typical cross-reference Gaspard Winckler, in the other half of *W*'s narrative, reveals that he never eats pretzels.) While his father's family was originally quite prosperous, his mother grew up in the Warsaw

ghetto; from there they moved to Paris during her teens. Perec's parents married in 1934, and he was their only child, born in 1936. His father enlisted when war broke out and was killed by a stray shell the day after the armistice, bleeding to death in a church converted into a hospital. Perec was evacuated by the Red Cross as a war orphan in 1942. His mother remained in Paris. She made one failed attempt to reach the free zone. In January of 1943 she was picked up in a raid with her sister and deported to Auschwitz. Perec comments: 'She saw the country of her birth again before she died. She died without understanding.'

Perec's evocation of his childhood in W – through chance memories, closely argued hypotheses and wishful speculation – is achieved with exhilarating clarity. The few surviving photographs are minutely analysed for clues, remembered details sifted for evidence, contradictions carefully weighed. Perec, deprived not only of his parents but of all traces of his Jewish inheritance, confronts the bewildering absences of his childhood identity. (Derrida wrote: *Juif serait l'autre nom de cette impossibilité d'être soi.*) In this context writing itself, any kind of writing, becomes the psyche's ultimate defence against nothingness, though Perec is as clear-sighted as Beckett about its final ineffectiveness:

> I do not know whether I have anything to *say*, I know that I am *saying* nothing; I do not know if what I might have to *say* is unsaid because it is unsayable (the unsayable is not buried inside writing, it is what prompted it in the first place); I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation … I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life.

The autobiographical chapters alternate with a fictional story Perec originally invented when he was 13, centred on 'W', an island off the coast of Tierra del Fuego which is wholly in thrall to the Olympic ideal. In Part One, Gaspard Winckler – a name Perec used for himself in his first unpublished autobiographical novel, and which turns up in *Life* as well – receives a mysterious summons from a certain Otto Apfelstahl, MD. They meet in a hotel. Gaspard Winckler is not Gaspard Winckler's real name, it turns out, but one accorded him with appropriate papers by a relief agency when he deserted from the Army. The original Gaspard Winckler is the deaf and dumb son of a fabulously wealthy opera singer. In an attempt to cure him she takes him on a round-the-world cruise on a yacht. Their ship is sunk in a hurricane off Tierra del Fuego. Only Gaspard Winckler's body is never found …

The story breaks off abruptly here, and in Part Two, an omniscient narrator tells us about the sports-dominated life of the inhabitants of W. The four Olympic villages on W compete against each other almost continually, under a system of penalties as well as rewards: while the day's winners are toasted and feasted, the losers are deprived of food, and forfeits are often imposed on them. A losing athlete may have to run around the track with his shoes on back to front, or between rows of officials who beat him with sticks and cudgels. As in Borges's lottery in Babylon, the ultimate penalty is death. The athletes' diets are deliberately deficient in sugar and vitamins. In addition, the rules of

the sports are often changed arbitrarily. It may be decided that the athlete who crosses the line last is the winner, or an official may suddenly shout 'Stop', and the athlete who keeps still the longest is then declared the victor. The athletes' names also depend on their performance on track or field, as the winners and runners-up of each event inherit the name of the original winner of the event, for as long as they hold the title. The current holder of the 100 metres Olympiad title would be simply known as the Jones, of the 400 the Gustafson, of the high jump the Andrews, and so on: names are added or lost as the athlete wins or loses. The most horrendous event on W takes place at the Atlantiads. Women are severely culled on W, only one in five being allowed to survive. On reaching child-bearing age, women are taken in batches of around fifty to the stadium, their clothes are removed, and they are released onto the track, where they start to run. When they are half a lap ahead, 176 of W's best athletes, also naked except for keenly spiked running shoes, are released in pursuit of them; the women are of course soon caught and raped by the fifty fittest and most cunning sportsmen.

The double narratives of W surreptitiously allude to each other; their juxtaposition is at once startling and seemingly inevitable. In their 'fragile overlapping', to use Perec's words, they complete each other. As the Olympic community becomes more and more like a concentration camp, the gaps and links between Perec's imagination and his experience become ever clearer. In a further twist to the tale, Perec concludes the book by remarking that several of the islands off Tierra del Fuego are, at the time of writing (1974), deportation camps run by Pinochet's fascists. The fiction which must have originated in the young Perec's imagination as a form of consoling escapism, not only reflects political reality but also anticipates it.

W's split between the opposite worlds of carefully documented reality and total imaginative freedom is typical of much of Perec's writing. Perec took the Nouveau Roman's concern with everyday living to new heights, martyring himself with minute enumerations of the *infra-ordinaire*, as he called it. We may be thankful some of his projects in this field never reached fruition – for instance, his plan to list all the food and drink he consumed in the course of 1974. Perec had a prodigious memory – indeed, like Joyce, he saw literary composition as largely a question of memory and problem-solving, and in the epilogue to *La Disparition* he rubbishes the idea of inspiration. Another scheme he never realised was to describe all the rooms he had ever slept in, excluding only those of earliest childhood. Perec liked the idea of cataloguing in neutral, objective terms the physical facts of external reality. For a half-achieved project called *Les Lieux* he chose 12 places of personal significance to him in Paris and set out to visit and describe each one once a year in a different month over 12 years. These careful documentary pieces would be played off against 12 evocations of each place generated solely by memory. At other times Perec finds a form to blend the two opposites. *Un cabinet d'amateur* describes a series of paintings in meticulously precise detail, as if for an auction catalogue. It's with a shock that you learn at the end of the book that none of the pictures actually exists. Absolute fixity and absolute freedom are fused in the illusion.

In a short introduction to W Perec explains how the book's meaning begins in the hiatus between the Gaspard Winckler story and the depiction of W. 'In this break, in this split suspending the story on an unidentifiable expectation, can be found the point of

departure for the whole of this book: the *points de suspension* on which the broken threads of childhood and the web of writing are caught.' The image of suspension is important in the book. Twice – once when saying goodbye to his mother for the last time at the train station, and once during his stay at Villard-de-Lans – Perec remembers himself clearly with an arm in a sling. In fact, he later works out, neither memory is true: these fractures occurred only within his imagination. They must have served psychically both to give an external expression to his inner suffering, and to suggest that that suffering, after a period of suspension, would eventually heal. Most of Perec's fiction hangs in a similar void, deliberately indifferent to the sensible aims with which we try to justify our lives. *Un homme qui dort* is about a student who one day gives up, for no particular reason. He lies on his bed, staring at the cracks in the ceiling, refuses to answer the door, and wanders haphazardly around Paris at night. The story alludes frequently to Sartre, but is more an undoing of Existentialism – as *Les Choses* also was of the Nouveau Roman – than an addition to its literature. Perec's deadpan style leads absolutely nowhere. The story is picked up again in Chapter 52 of *Life*. Here the student is called Grégoire Simpson, after the insect man in Kafka. In the end he simply disappears, but the chapter concludes movingly with an incident from Simpson's childhood in which the young boy dresses up in traditional costume to join in a mid-Lent procession, 'as proud as Punch and as grave as a judge'. Later he rushes about excitedly, pausing only 'to stuff himself with juniper-roast ham and to slake his thirst with great gulps of Ripaille, that white wine as light as glacier water, as dry as gunflint'. The more flexible medium of *Life* can both include and transcend Perec's earlier style.

The emptiness of *Un homme qui dort* becomes positive emasculation in *La Disparition*. The absent e broods like a vengeful god over the text. As e is the fifth letter of the alphabet, the fifth of the novel's 26 chapters is missing, as is the second of its six books, e being the second of the vowels. The fifth of the 26 boxes containing Anton Voyl's manuscripts is also missing; Anton Voyl's name itself seems heartlessly truncated. Indeed, contact with e in the book means death. In a famous scene a bartender drops dead when asked to make a Porto-flip because it requires *œufs*, and they have an e in them. The absence of by far the most popular letter in the French alphabet is a self-imposed handicap similar to the young Perec's imaginary slings, and indicative of a similarly fundamental lack. *La Disparition* adopts the plot of the detective novel with a few epistemological knobs on; the characters who solve its enigma automatically die, or rather disappear. A finished crossword or jigsaw puzzle might be seen as an analogue to these fictional vanishings. More sinisterly, they suggest the limitless powers of modern techniques of annihilation, capable of extinguishing all traces of a disappeared person.

Perec's games parody our instinctive willingness to believe in language's absolute authority, and release language into a neutral space where words fulfil their own random, intrinsic connections. One of the most appealing features of Perec's writing is its lack of self-righteousness, its whole-hearted enjoyment of its own fictive procedures. *Life: A User's Manual* is very much the consummation of his achievement, bringing together stories and characters from much of his previous writing, and continually alluding to those writers who define the fictional space in which Perec's texts also aspire to move. In a short piece in *L'Arc* on his borrowings from Flaubert, he explained that he saw these references as being like indications of land-measuring or the nodes of a

network, establishing the contexts and parameters of his own literary sensibility: but they can be seen as even more than this. In the disembodied world of his childhood, as described in *W*, he finds in reading almost a substitute for his lost parents. 'I reread the books I love and I love the books I reread, and each time it is the same enjoyment, whether I reread twenty pages, three chapters, or the whole book: an enjoyment of complicity, of collusion, or more especially, and in addition, of having in the end found kin again.' Intertextuality is built into the very structure of *Life*, but in highly un-modernist fashion. The references argue for no unified cultural tradition, and noticing them adds nothing to the text's meaning: they simply furnish Perec with elements of material requiring to be worked into each chapter.

Life: A User's Manual follows the poetry of Roussel in approaching its location – the apartment block – from the vantage-point of an instant frozen in time. Perec first got the idea for the book from a painting of Saul Steinberg's called *The Art of Living*, which shows an apartment block with part of its façade removed, revealing the interiors of twenty or so rooms. (Within the novel the painter Valène is embarked on, but will never complete, a similar project.) Each of the book's 99 chapters describes a room, or section of the stairs, or lift, itemising its contents, and filling in the often wildly improbable backgrounds of its present and previous inhabitants. The most important of the book's multifarious narratives concerns Percival Bartlebooth, an eccentric Harrow-educated millionaire.

Strung between the extreme asceticism of Melville's Bartleby and the prodigal generosity of Valéry Larbaud's A.O. Barnabooth, Bartlebooth organises his life into a single massively self-contradictory project. Though absolutely talentless, he spends ten years having himself taught to paint water-colours by Valène. The next twenty years, accompanied by his servant Smautf, he spends tracking around the globe, indifferent to political upheavals, painting water-colours in 500 arbitrarily chosen ports. These are dispatched every fortnight or so back to 11 rue Simon-Crubellier, where Gaspard Winckler glues them onto plywood and then cuts them into ever more difficult jigsaw puzzles of 750 pieces each. On his return Bartlebooth completes the puzzles in chronological order. When solved, the joins of the puzzles are recomposed by a special machine, separated from their backing and glaze, and returned to the spot where they were originally painted, to be dipped in the sea until the colours dissolve and the paper is its original white again. Bartlebooth's self-cancelling scheme is a typically Perecian one: 'his aim was for nothing, nothing at all, to subsist, for nothing but the void to emerge from it, for only the immaculate whiteness of a blank to remain, only the gratuitous perfection of a project entirely devoid of utility.'

The image of the puzzle dominates *Life: A User's Manual*. All of every chapter's 42 constitutive elements are fitted together like parts of a puzzle, and the chapters themselves fit together like pieces in the overall jigsaw of the book. The fictions with which Perec links his given elements reveal him at his most inventive and playful. The book teems with startling characters and fictions, and seems as endless in its narrative resources as even the greatest of Victorian three-deckers. There is the ethnologist Marcel Appenzzell who pursues for five years and 11 months an unknown tribe of Sumatrans without getting them once to acknowledge his existence; there is the domino-playing

hamster Polonius; there is Cinoc, the word-killer, who is hired by Larousse to diagnose obsolete words and eliminate them from the dictionary but who, on leaving his job, sets about compiling a dictionary of all the forgotten words that still appeal to him; there is James Sherwood, collector of unica (one-of-a-kinds), who pays a million dollars in counterfeit currency for the vase in which Joseph of Arimathaea supposedly gathered the blood of the dying Jesus; there is Monsieur Jérôme who left Paris in the diplomatic service as cultural attaché in Lahore and returned home penniless years later, but will never talk of his Eastern experiences; there is Hutting the artist, famous for his 'haze period', which places him on a par with his famous quasi-namesake Huffing, the New York pioneer of *Arte brutta* who first appears in Harry Mathews's *The Conversions*.

Perec, like Bartlebooth, was haunted by ideas of incompletion, despite his manic productiveness. In an interview a couple of years before his death from lung cancer in 1982, he pictured his achievement as *l'image d'un livre inachevé, d'une 'oeuvre' inachevée à l'intérieur d'une littérature jamais achevée*. Though each of his books is an element in an overall ensemble, the only thing about that ensemble he can ever know is that he will never finish it. Bartlebooth's project is similarly doomed. Time is frozen in *Life: A User's Manual* at a little before eight on the evening of 23 June 1975. Bartlebooth has just died in the middle of his 439th puzzle. His efforts to complete his arbitrarily self-imposed scheme have been complicated both by the fiendish cunning of Gaspard Winckler and by the loss of his eyesight. The 439th puzzle is almost finished except for a space in the perfect shape of an X: but the piece the dead Bartlebooth holds is shaped like a W.

In W also the young Perec sees in an X the story of his childhood: by extending its branches you get a swastika, by unjoining and rotating it you get an SS sign. Two X's joined horizontally can be easily made into the Star of David. Bartlebooth's defeat at the hands of the already dead Winckler is both poignant and uplifting; all the systems of life, from Nazism to the Olympics, must leak at the seams, and only through the encroachments of chaos does existence transcend the absolutes it craves and become livable.