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Practical exercises

Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps.

Apply yourself. Take your time.

Note down the place: the terrace of a café near the junction of
the Rue de Bac and the Boulevard
Saint-Germain

the time: seven o' clock in the evening

the date: 15 May 1973

the weather: set fair

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on. Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you?

Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see.

You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.

The street: try to describe the street, what it's made of, what it's used for. The people in the street. The cars. What sort of cars? The buildings: note that they're on the comfortable, well-heeled side. Distinguish residential from official buildings.

The shops. What do they sell in the shops? There are no food shops. Oh yes, there's a baker's. Ask yourself where the locals do their shopping.

The cafés. How many cafés are there? One, two, three, four. Why did you choose this one? Because you know it, because it's in the sun, because it sells cigarettes. The other shops: antique shops, clothes, hi-fi, etc. Don't say, don't write 'etc.'. Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid. You still haven't looked at anything, you've merely picked out what you've long ago picked out.

Force yourself to see more flatly.

Detect a rhythm: the passing of cars. The cars arrive in clumps because they've been stopped by a red light further up or down the street.

Count the cars.

Look at the number plates. Distinguish between the cars registered in Paris and the rest.

Note the absence of taxis precisely when there seem to be a lot of people waiting for them.

Read what's written in the street: Morris columns,* newspaper kiosks, posters, traffic signs, graffiti, discarded handouts, shop signs.

Beauty of the women.

The fashion is for heels that are too high.

Decipher a bit of the town, deduce the obvious facts: the obsession with ownership, for example. Describe the number of operations the driver of a vehicle is subjected to when he parks merely in order to go and buy a hundred grams of fruit jelly:

- parks by means of a certain amount of toing and froing
- switches off the engine
- withdraws the key, setting off a first anti-theft device
- extricates himself from the vehicle
- winds up the left-hand front window
- locks it
- checks that the left-hand rear door is locked;
- if not:
 - opens it
 - raises the handle inside
 - slams the door
 - checks it's locked securely

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

- circles the car; if need be, checks that the boot is locked properly
- checks that the right-hand rear door is locked; if not, recommences the sequence of operations already carried out on the left-hand rear door
- winds up the right-hand front window
- shuts the right-hand front door
- locks it
- before walking away, looks all around him as if to make sure the car is still there and that no one will come and take it away.

Decipher a bit of the town. Its circuits: why do the buses go from this place to that? Who chooses the routes, and by what criteria? Remember that the trajectory of a Paris bus *intra muros* is defined by a two-figure number the first figure of which describes the central and the second the peripheral terminus. Find examples, find exceptions: all the buses whose number begins with a 2 start from the Gare St-Lazare, with a 3 from the Gare de l'Est. All the buses whose number ends in a 2 terminate roughly speaking in the 16th arrondissement or in Boulogne.

(Before, they used letters: the S, which was Queneau's favourite, has become the 84. Wax sentimental over the memory of buses that had a platform at the back, the shape of the tickets, the ticket collector with his little machine hooked on to his belt.)

The people in the streets: where are they coming from? Where are they going to? Who are they?

People in a hurry. People going slowly. Parcels. Prudent people who've taken their macs. Dogs: they're the only animals to be seen. You can't see any birds - yet you know there are birds - and can't hear them either. You might see a cat slip underneath a car, but it doesn't happen.

Nothing is happening, in fact.

Try to classify the people: those who live locally and those who don't live locally. There don't seem to be any tourists. The season doesn't lend itself to it, and anyway the area isn't especially touristy. What are the local attractions? Salomon Bernard's house? The church of St Thomas Aquinas? No 5, Rue Sébastien-Bottin?*

Time passes. Drink your beer. Wait.

Note that the trees are a long way off (on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Boulevard Raspail), that there are no cinemas or theatres, that there are no building sites to be seen, that most of the houses seem to have obeyed the regulations so far as renovation is concerned.

A dog, of an uncommon breed (Afghan hound? saluki?).

A Land Rover that seems to be equipped for crossing the Sahara (in spite of yourself, you're only noting the untoward, the peculiar, the wretched exceptions; the opposite is what you should be doing).

Carry on

Until the scene becomes improbable

until you have the impression, for the briefest of moments, that you are in a strange town or, better still, until you can no longer understand what is happening or is not happening, until the whole place becomes strange, and you no longer even know that this is what is called a town, a street, buildings, pavements . . .

Make torrential rain fall, smash everything, make grass grow, replace the people by cows and, where the Rue de Bac meets the Boulevard Saint-Germain, make King Kong appear, or Tex Avery's herculean mouse, towering a hundred metres above the roofs of the buildings!

Or again: strive to picture to yourself, with the greatest possible

*The address of the largest and most glamorous of French publishing houses, Editions Gallimard, by whom Percec would like to have been published, though he never was.

precision, beneath the network of streets, the tangle of sewers, the lines of the Métro, the invisible underground proliferation of conduits (electricity, gas, telephone lines, water mains, express letter tubes), without which no life would be possible on the surface.

Underneath, just underneath, resuscitate the eocene: the limestone, the marl and the soft chalk, the gypsum, the lacustrine Saint-Ouen limestone, the Beauchamp sands, the rough limestone, the Soissons sands and lignites, the plastic clay, the hard chalk.

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Or else:

Rough draft of a letter

I think of you, often
sometimes I go back into a café, I sit near the door, I order a coffee
I arrange my packet of cigarettes, a box of matches, a writing pad,
my felt-pen on the fake marble table

I spend a long time stirring my cup of coffee with the teaspoon
(yet I don't put any sugar in my coffee, I drink it allowing the
sugar to melt in my mouth, like the people of the North, like the
Russians and Poles when they drink tea)

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

At the top and to the right of the sheet of paper, I inscribe the
date, sometimes the place, sometimes the time, I pretend to be
writing a letter

I write slowly, very slowly, as slowly as I can, I trace, I draw each
letter, each accent, I check the punctuation marks

I stare attentively at a small notice, the price-list for ice-creams,
at a piece of ironwork, a blind, the hexagonal yellow ashtray (in
actual fact, it's an equilateral triangle, in the cutoff corners of
which semi-circular dents have been made where cigarettes can
be rested)

(...)

Outside there's a bit of sunlight
the café is nearly empty
two renovators' men are having a rum at the bar, the owner is
dozing behind his till, the waitress is cleaning the coffee machine

I am thinking of you
you are walking in your street, it's wintertime, you've turned up
your foxfur collar, you're smiling, and remote

(...)

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Places

(Notes on a work in progress)

In 1969, I chose, in Paris, twelve places (streets, squares, circuses,
an arcade), where I had either lived or else was attached to by
particular memories.

I have undertaken to write a description of two of these places
each month. One of these descriptions is written on the spot and
is meant to be as neutral as possible. Sitting in a café or walking
in the street, notebook and pen in hand, I do my best to describe
the houses, the shops and the people that I come across, the posters,
and in a general way, all the details that attract my eye. The other
description is written somewhere other than the place itself. I then
do my best to describe it from memory, to evoke all the memories
that come to me concerning it, whether events that have taken
place there, or people I have met there. Once these descriptions
are finished, I slip them into an envelope that I seal with wax.
On several occasions, I have got a man or woman photographer
friend to go with me to the places I was describing who, either
freely, or as indicated by me, took photographs that I then slipped,
without looking at them (with a single exception), into the corre-
sponding envelopes. I have also had occasion to slip into these
envelopes various items capable later on of serving as evidence:
Métro tickets, for example, or bar slips, or cinema tickets, or
handouts, etc.