

Georges Perec

APPROACHES TO WHAT? [1973]

(Source: Perec, Georges (1997) *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, translated by John Sturrock, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 205–7)

Editor's introduction

This short chapter by the novelist Georges Perec (1936–1982) was first published in *Cause Commune* in 1973 before it became part of his collection *L'Infra-ordinaire*. The term 'infra-ordinary' designates an everydayness that requires a kind of quixotic or excessive attention. Perec uses neologisms like 'infra-ordinary' and 'endotic' to describe an everyday that is neither ordinary nor extraordinary, neither banal nor exotic. The everyday that Perec is interested in is not simply the everyday of the surrealists (that 'sense of the marvellous suffusing everyday existence' that Louis Aragon wrote about: Aragon [1926] 1987: 24). In many ways it should be seen as a kind of surreal 'take' on the social sciences. Perec's everyday requires a ruthless systematic attention that, while it can be read as simply eccentric, suggests the possibility of an anthropology that has yet to differentiate between the significant and the insignificant. Perec's task then is to foreground what is continually missed when traditional notions of significance are applied. For instance in 'An Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris' he begins by cataloguing what exists in the street (the shops, cafés and so on) only to suggest that these are already too significant. Instead he writes that he intends to 'describe what remains: that which we generally don't notice, which doesn't call attention to itself, which is of no importance; what happens when nothing happens, what passes when nothing passes, except time, people, cars, and clouds' (Perec quoted in Adair 1993: 104). Given the quasi-sociological slant of this approach it may be of more than anecdotal interest that Perec was for a while friendly with Henri Lefebvre and that Lefebvre helped the impoverished Perec get a job doing market research.

Perec's literary affiliation was to a literary group called Oulipo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* – Workshop for Potential Literature), a group originally founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. While the kind of austere self-imposed strictures that these writers placed on themselves might seem a world away from the everyday (for

instance writing a novel without the letter 'e' in it), much of Oulipo work has an evident everyday quality about it. Certainly Perec's most famous novel *Life: A User's Manual* (1978) can be seen as a novelistic version of the 'infra-ordinary' as it weaves together the everyday minutiae of a host of lives that are never reducible to such a vacuous epithet as 'ordinary'.

Further reading: Adair 1993; Bellos 1999; Highmore 2000b; Mathews and Brotchie 1998; Perec 1987.

WHAT SPEAKS TO US, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist. Aeroplanes achieve existence only when they are hijacked. The one and only destiny of motor-cars is to drive into plane trees. Fifty-two weekends a year, fifty-two casualty lists: so many dead and all the better for the news media if the figures keep on going up! Behind the event there has to be a scandal, a fissure, a danger, as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal: natural cataclysms or historical upheavals, social unrest, political scandals.

In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory, let's not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible. What is scandalous isn't the pit explosion, it's working in coalmines. 'Social problems' aren't 'a matter of concern' when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, tower-blocks that collapse, forest fires, tunnels that cave in, the Drugstore des Champs-Élysées burns down. Awful! Terrible! Monstrous! Scandalous! But where's the scandal? The true scandal? Has the newspaper told us anything except: not to worry, as you can see life exists, with its ups and its downs, things happen, as you can see.

The daily papers talk of everything except the daily. The papers annoy me, they teach me nothing. What they recount doesn't concern me, doesn't ask me questions and doesn't answer the questions I ask or would like to ask.

What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?

To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren't the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it's anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?

How are we to speak of these 'common things', how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.

What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will

speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we've been pillaging from others. Not the exotic any more, but the endotic.

To question what seems so much a matter of course that we've forgotten its origins. To rediscover something of the astonishment that Jules Verne or his readers may have felt faced with an apparatus capable of reproducing and transporting sounds. For that astonishment existed, along with thousands of others, and it's they which have moulded us.

What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why?

Describe your street. Describe another street. Compare.

Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out.

Question your tea spoons.

What is there under your wallpaper?

How many movements does it take to dial a phone number? Why?

Why don't you find cigarettes in grocery stores? Why not?

It matters little to me that these questions should be fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project. It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that's exactly what makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we've tried in vain to lay hold on our truth.