

Margaret Drabble

— Introduction —

Georges Perec was a writer obsessed by the art of classification. He loved lists and inventories and catalogues and ‘the ineffable joys of enumeration’. Yet his own work is hard to classify, and attempts to pigeon-hole it fail to capture the multiplicity of his achievement. During his short, difficult, but immensely productive life, he wrote in several genres, but did not repeat himself, except when using repetition as a literary device. In the introductory essay to this volume, he describes his (unfulfilled) desire to tackle anything and everything— ‘big books and small ones, novels and poems, plays, libretti, crime fiction, adventure stories, science fiction, serials and children’s books ...’: *‘des livres gros et des livres courts, des romans et des poèmes, des drames, des livrets d’opéra, des romans policiers, des romans d’aventure, des romans de science-fiction, des feuilletons, des livres pour enfants ...’* He had a sense that each new attempt was building towards the completion of a never-to-be-completed puzzle, which the act of writing itself

created and continued to create. It is not surprising, therefore, that to English readers unfamiliar with his work he is chiefly known by one crude characterization – as the experimental novelist who wrote a whole book in the form of an extended ‘lipogram’ (a text that excludes a particular letter or letters of the alphabet) without the letter ‘e’. It was called *La Disparition*, and was published in French in 1969, and in English in 1994 in a brilliantly and freely inventive e-free translation by Gilbert Adair under the title *A Void*.

Perc’s name would surface in discussions of avant-garde contemporary fiction, or the French nouveau roman, but few commentators added any first-hand knowledge of his work. He remained, to the British, a freak, a curiosity, a player of verbal tricks. Some knew that he was a member of a literary group which called itself OuLiPo, but what OuLiPo was or did was, to most of us, a mystery. He and his group – an off-shoot of the Surrealists – were both unknown to me until recently, except by repute, and I discovered him more or less by chance, through our shared interest in the jigsaw puzzle, a recurrent motif in all his work and the dominant metaphor of his greatest novel.

Little known to most London literati, Georges Perc in his later years was a well-known figure in Paris. People recognized him in the street and strangers greeted him by name. This was not because

he was a famous writer, but because he had a famous face, attached in a familiar photograph to the weekly crossword puzzle he composed for some years in the 1970s for the illustrated news magazine, *Le Point*. He was also occasionally to be seen on television, and once seen, was not easily forgotten. His friend Harry Mathews (in *The Orchard: A Remembrance*, 1988) writes that his Afro hair and his goatee ‘gave his face the projective power of a primitive mask’, and it is this image by which we recognize him today, although of course he did not always look like that: in his memoirs Perec offers us unsparing descriptions of himself as a boy, based on a few surviving photographs, with his crinkly hair, his chubby cheeks, his big ears, his knock-knees, his ill-assorted clothes, his itchy check cowboy-shirts, his dim-witted air. He looked, as a child, like a refugee, which in a manner of speaking he was.

The photographs of himself as a boy were precious to him, and he analysed them in detail in *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1975; in English, 1988). They are reproduced in David Bellos’ engrossing biography, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (1993). These two volumes, the second of which draws from, questions and expands on the first, offer a profound and thoughtful account of Perec’s short, difficult and immensely productive life.

He was born in Paris in 1936, the son of lower-middle-class Jewish immigrants from Poland

(a family of jewellers, craftsmen, greengrocers, machinists) and he lost both his parents to the war, though by different means. (The name 'Perec' is a French adaptation of the more familiar 'Peretz' and is not in any way connected with the French-Breton surname spelled in the same way: the oddity of the derivation encouraged Georges' lasting fascination with odd names and double identities.) His father, who joined the French Foreign Legion to fight for his adopted country in the early days of the war, died and was buried as a prisoner of the Germans behind the lines at Nogent-sur-Seine in June 1940; his mother was arrested as a Jew with other family members and disappeared into the camp of Drancy, outside Paris, early in 1943. She was never seen again.

Disappearances, unsurprisingly, feature frequently in Perec's thoughts and works. His attachment to and recall of the minute particulars of place – of street names, buildings and *arrondissements* – also connect with this early irreparable loss. His need to locate himself was powerful.

He summarizes his earliest memories thus: 'I have no childhood memories. Up to my twelfth year or thereabouts, my story comes to barely a couple of lines: I lost my father at four, my mother at six; I spent the war in various boarding houses at Villard de Lans [in the French Alps]. In 1945, my father's sister and her husband adopted me.'

From these lines and from the photographs, and with the help of what proved a highly effective psychoanalysis, he reconstructed his past, and placed it, through memoir, fiction and alternative narrative, in the context of the war and the Holocaust which had destroyed his relatives. That analysis (from 1971–75, with distinguished analyst and writer J. - B. Pontalis) is the subject of the most remarkable essay in this collection, one of the most remarkable and revealing accounts of an analysis I have ever read, its title here translated as ‘Backtracking’.

The orphaned boy was well cared for by his aunt Esther and the Bienenfeld family, which after the displacements caused by the war settled in Paris. There he received a conventional education at the Lycée Henri IV and the Sorbonne, followed by military service with a parachute regiment. (A transcript of his possibly drunken declamation in 1959 describing parachute jumps, *Le saut en parachute*, states that parachutists needs must be optimists, and claims that Clara Malraux told him that ‘a parachute jump was like psychoanalysis’, involving a similar element of trust. This was some years before he entrusted himself to the psychoanalytic journey.) After his army experiences, he was employed successively in market research and as an archivist, occupations which leave manifest traces in his writing.

His real work was writing, although he continued to be employed as an archivist in a medical research

laboratory until three years before his death. His first novel, *Les Choses* (1965: translated by Bellos as *Things*, 1990) had considerable success, in terms of esteem, and for a first novel it sold well. It won a respected literary prize, was much translated, notably into several East-European languages – the English, as so often, were slower to respond – and was regarded by some Eastern bloc readers as an attack on materialism (a simplistic interpretation perhaps aided by the book's concluding enigmatic epigraph from Karl Marx, telling us that the quest for truth must itself be true). As Perec's essay on fashion, 'Twelve Sidelong Glances', reveals, his relationship to the world of proliferating objects, to the art and language of advertising, and to the ephemeral nature of style was far more complex, and at times, despite his strictures, could fairly be described as celebratory.

He loved the oddity of objects, although wealth in itself did not interest him – ashtrays and bud vases and other such cheap 'collectibles' or 'bibelots' feature frequently in his work, as they did on his desk top. The 'bud vase', a phrase in English hitherto unknown to me, although its meaning is self-explanatory, seems to have exerted a particular fascination for him: in French the word is 'soliflore', which is more euphonious and sounds less commercial, less *nouveau*. In his fondness for things, and for the exhaustive description of things,