An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Wellesley: Making a Case for the Ethnographic Value of Georges Perec’s *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*

In the mid-autumn of 1974, Parisian novelist Georges Perec, already known for his work with the constrained-writing-based Oulipo movement, embarked on a project that has been variously described as an “experimental psycho-geographical novel” (Hill), a “compact document of urban signage and ephemera” (Morse) and simply “a text” (Perec 49). Not quite 50 pages long, Perec’s *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* is his effort to capture as thoroughly as he can the day-to-day activities of the people and things in Paris’s Place Saint-Sulpice over one October weekend. He ignored the major landmarks of the square—the shops, a church, government buildings, famous fountains—and instead focused on the rest: “that which is generally not taken notice of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds” (Perec 3). Perec makes two claims when attempting this method of writing. First, that by presenting all the tiny details of his surroundings he can craft a compelling work of literature that will hold its readers’ attention rather than boring them. And second, that by recording these details, he can capture a kind of distilled essence of daily Parisian life—a slice of Parisian culture—that will be clear to the reader without his having to suspend the narrative to explain what is and what is not normal for this neighborhood. It is this second trait of *An Attempt* that gives it true anthropological value. This tiny, genre-less text manages to be both a work of literature and an ethnography.
In my own attempt to better understand the nature of *An Attempt*, I conducted a similar observation at an ice cream shop in downtown Wellesley, trying to get a better idea of what it is possible to capture out of the hundreds of tiny actions that occur each moment. Perec writes in a distinctively brusque, almost clinical style, never delayed by examining any one moment or speculating too long on what a gesture, action, or object means. From my own experience, I learned that this style of writing is a necessity when trying to capture even the majority of the things that happen every second. Perec attempts to capture the movement of people, buses, animals, and cars all at once, and in doing so gives a clear representation of the chaos outside the café from which he observes: “Three taxis at the taxi stand. A 96. A 63. A bike courier. Deliveryman delivering beverages. An 86. A little girl with a schoolbag on her shoulders” (Perec 13). Here, everything is brought to a kind of equality, mentioned in only the briefest possible way without elevating one object or action over another. Early in the work, Perec repeats the phrase “passes by” for each person or thing, but soon abandons it. As readers, we learn to insert it mentally; all things Perec notices are in motion.

The street I chose to observe, Central Street, was similarly chaotic. In one moment, I captured: “A woman with a CVS bag passes by. A man in a Fair Isle patterned knit hat. A man in a Burberry scarf. A Needham Driving School sedan (red, Toyota Camry). A group of four young women, some in high heeled boots, with Starbucks drinks” (Appendix 15). But one of the first things I noticed was that, even writing as fast as I could, I missed a great deal of what happened. My goal was to try to conduct my observation in as ethnographic a way as possible; I wanted to record *everything* that went on outside the shop window, so that I would create an accurate portrayal of the flow of activity in downtown Wellesley. After only observing for a few minutes, I noted that “[i]t is impossible to record everything. I miss people and cars passing as I write. I
can see them from the corner of my eye but observe nothing about them” (Appendix 11). Perec found the same difficulty when he realized that things had changed without his noticing the change occurring: “Obvious limits to such an undertaking: even when my only goal is just to observe, I don’t see what takes place a few meters from me: I don’t notice, for example, that cars are parking” (Perec 15). The fact that Perec was disturbed by this underscores his ethnographic intent for this piece; he too wanted to capture the full picture of the culture he was recording, but could not do so completely in any given moment. Had he been recording simply for literary purposes, he would not have cared about what he missed, instead recording the most notable things from a literary point of view—the unusual or dramatic, not the everyday. Anthropologist David Fetterman makes this point brilliantly in his essay “The First Step: An Overview,” saying, “A key difference between the investigative reporter and the ethnographer… is that the journalist seeks out the unusual—the murder, the plane crash, or the bank robbery—the ethnographer writes about the routine, daily lives of people. The more predictable patterns of human thought and behavior are the focus of inquiry” (Fetterman 1). Journalists, as well as novelists and travel writers, purposefully elevate some details over others in order to craft an entertaining and engaging narrative. Perec does not. He writes as an ethnographer writes, trying to capture and record all details equally, knowing that each carries significance for the culture of which it is a part.

Nevertheless, no matter how sincere Perec’s ethnographic intent may have been, his writing is still very much affected by his positionality. He cannot notice and record everything, but what he does notice is not random. It is determined by his own enculturation: what he was taught is worth noticing and responding to over his lifetime. Perec notices the numbers on buses, slogans he sees, a few types of motorbikes and cars, types of food, certain people, how they are
dressed, and what they are carrying. He notices people’s genders and ages, and (significantly, when nonwhite) their race. Occasionally, he records wind in the trees or pigeons as they circle the square. In my own writing, I noticed the make and model of cars, the ages and genders of people and how they were grouped, what people were wearing (particularly when unusual), the brands of some of their clothing and bags, and the brands of the drinks they carried. More than Perec, I tried to determine relationships between people—parents with children, or couples. I was also surprised by my own ethnocentrism—I noticed race just a few times, but only ever in nonwhite people.

In his essay “Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research,” Robert Emerson describes a similar situation in which three different college students describe a grocery store checkout counter. Each encounter differs slightly, but the overall details are fairly similar, and the checkout process proceeds in the same order. Yet, each student chooses, likely without realizing it, to focus on different aspects of the process. One describes the people’s appearances and what they buy, another describes other shoppers’ behaviors and how they affect the student, and the third focuses in on the checkout clerk and how he interacts with others. Emerson says of this process,

“Writing fieldnote descriptions, then, is not so much a matter of passively copying down ‘facts’ about ‘what happened.’ Rather, such writing involves active processes of interpretation and sense-making: noting and writing down some things as ‘significant,’ noting but ignoring others as ‘not significant,’ and even missing other possibly significant things all together. As a result, similar (even the same) events can be described for different purposes, with different sensitivities and concerns” (Emerson 8).
Perec is intensely aware of how his own state of mind, location, and overall enculturation affect what he notices, even if he doesn't describe it in these terms. On his second day observing the Place Saint-Sulpice, he records all the things that have changed since the previous day, intensely conscious that alterations to his own state of being will be reflected in what he records. He says: “I’m drinking a Vittel water, whereas yesterday I was drinking a coffee (how does that transform the square?)” (Perec 30). This seems like an inconsequential change, but it indicates that he possesses the reflexivity of an anthropologist; he is trying to be as aware as he can be of his own point of view. Later on, he asks himself, “why are two nuns more interesting than two other passersby?” (34). He recognizes that his eye is drawn to the “abnormal” things he sees—things that set subcultures apart, rather than describe the larger Parisian culture—while minimizing his own elevation of the unusual or entertaining. As an unknowing ethnographer, he questions his own worldview: what makes a nun “abnormal,” and compared to what?

Of course, what makes An Attempt a truly anthropologic work is that it so successfully describes a specific Parisian culture. It is packed with French and Parisian key symbols, and people who seem to live out urban Western capitalist key scenarios. From the beginning of chapter 2, the reader is thrown into a chaotic urban scene, full of people rushing to catch taxis, with cars and all types of commercial vehicles passing, and many pedestrians all moving—going somewhere—in one form or another (Perec 10). Soon, Parisian key symbols begin to stack up: smoking cigarettes on park benches (11), purchasing and then carrying baguettes on foot (11), Catholic churches—in this case, holding funerals (13), mothers returning children to school after lunchtime (14), mopeds (15), “small poodle-type dog[s]” (16), handcarts for shopping (15), even Japanese tourists (17) and the act of sitting in cafés itself. Meanwhile, the people themselves often fit perfectly into French key scenarios, and Perec subtly notes that they do: “A deliveryman
in a white smock” (11), “a child taking his dog for a run (looks like Snowy)” (12) (here, the reference is to the French key symbol of Tintin, a young boy who goes on many adventures with his dog Snowy, and underscores the “Frenchness” of this Parisian boy), two men “with pipes and black satchels,” who fit the 1970’s Western key scenario of the successful middle-class businessman (12), the dutiful stay-at-home mother who returns her children to school at lunch (13), and “a young girl eating a palmier,” a particularly French pastry (14).

Indeed, Perec brings an emic perspective to the Parisian scene he describes, and he assumes that his readers will be familiar enough with French culture to be able to understand these symbols and their meanings. He mentions, for example, “elegant women” (16) yet does not give any reason for why he has labeled them as such. Instead, he expects that the reader will supply the collections of French cultural markers of elegance that he expects them to already possess—perhaps an expensive dress, shoes, jewelry, and bag; an elaborate hairstyle; and well-applied makeup, for example. This is the biggest threat to the value of An Attempt as an ethnography: that it describes French culture to French people already enculturated into French society. Nevertheless, there is powerful anthropological value even in this act, because Perec seeks to make Parisian readers aware of their own enculturation, including all the cultural symbols and markers that they encounter daily without being fully aware of them. In order to do so, he steps out of his emic perspective and attains a largely etic one, by casting himself as a detached observer, rather than an active participant in the Place Saint-Sulpice milieu. In her essay “On Presence,” Peta Rethmann describes this process of stepping back and taking on an etic perspective as being “out of one’s mind” in a way that “paradoxically, leads one back to one’s mind” (Rethmann 1). In other words, it is a way of removing oneself from one’s enculturated worldview in order to see it more clearly. This is what Perec does himself in order
to describe the Parisian square, and what he asks his readers to do as well, in order to bring to their attention actions that they would normally consider to be of little to no value, yet form the skeleton of their culture.

An Attempt has many of the good qualities of an ethnography—a sense of self-awareness of Perec’s own worldview, relativism, key symbols and scenarios of 1970s Parisian culture (made clear if not elaborated upon), a largely successful attempt at an etic perspective—but it also has some of ethnography’s blind spots, as well. It describes almost exclusively visual information; the entire work is silent except for occasional church bells and one memorable parenthetical: “A child slides a toy car along the windowpane of the café (slight noise)” (15). In a few instances, Perec mentions that he is cold, but otherwise a sense of touch is completely absent. Taste and smell do not appear at all, even though Perec describes the visual appearance of many different foods and drinks. In his introduction to his seminal work Writing Culture, anthropologist James Clifford calls this tendency “visualism.” In Western ethnography, he argues, the importance of the senses has been “hierarchically ordered” with vision (visual evidence) above sound, and both of these far above touch, smell, and taste. On the other hand, he says, appealing to all senses is a much more common phenomenon in fiction and travel writing (Clifford 11). The idea that the full range of sense belongs to the domain of nonscientific writing does ethnography a disservice; the few glimpses of sound in An Attempt make the world Perec describes much richer, far beyond what further visual description would accomplish.

Unfortunately, I found myself falling into the same “visualistic” patterns in my own observations, paying almost no attention to sounds, smells, or a sense of touch. Occasionally I noted the conversations between people in the ice cream shop, but only then the content of what they were saying, not the tone, pitch or volume of their voices. In one moment, I purposefully
imitated Perec’s parenthetical mention of sound: “The young boy in the window finishes his ice cream cone (slight crunching)” (Appendix 11). Even this tiny inclusion of sound made the scene more real and present, even when the reader was only me, returning to my fieldnotes to turn them into a more cohesive whole. The addition of multiple senses—what Clifford calls “the sensorium” (11)—would have made both Perec’s and my own observations that much better. Nevertheless, that Perec falls prey to visualism indicates he is thinking in line with most of his contemporary anthropologists. His intent is to create an unembellished portrait of what was actually happening in Place Saint-Sulpice on those particular three days in October of 1974, rather than a kind of travel piece extolling the virtues (or lack thereof) of the café people, food, and ambiance. He writes with a lack of judgement, steps away from his emic perspective, presents all symbols equally to the best of his ability, and in doing so creates an ethnography of the culture he knows best.

Ultimately, Perec’s *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* is what James Clifford calls a partial truth: “committed and incomplete” (7). It is one sincere attempt to capture an ephemeral moment in the heart of Paris in a very particular time and place. But as Perec writes, he realizes how partial his truth must be: he cannot record everything, because even with anthropological aims—just to observe and record—he still misses things. He also affects his environment: friends and distant acquaintances come over to say hello (Perec 14, 33), he drinks water instead of coffee, and it “transforms the square” (30). He is a participant observer in this Parisian café, and his awareness of this fact makes him an anthropologist, at least for the moment. What makes *An Attempt* radical both as a work of literature and an ethnography comes from the heart of Perec’s intent: to create a work of writing that can deeply affect the emotions of his readers, while refraining from embellishing certain moments or actions above others. He
prevents himself from assigning his own personal significance to symbols, as fiction and travel writers do. I admire Perec’s skill at doing this, because my experiences observing in this way taught me how easy it is to lose myself in one description and miss dozens of other important moments.

Two years after completing An Attempt, Perec began work on his most famous novel, the 700-plus page Life: A User’s Manual (Morse). This work truly is a novel, and it includes his opinions about how people ought to live, as fiction writers intentionally or unintentionally must include. I have no doubt, however, that he drew inspiration from An Attempt, which at heart is all the observation without the moral. It is just Life, Perec’s partial truth about the culture of which he was a part.
Works Cited

Appendix (see below pp 11-15).


APPENDIX:

An attempt at exhausting a place in Wellesley
Alyssa Robins

Date: November 29, 2019
Time: 1:57pm
Location: J.P. Licks ice cream shop
Weather: Chilly with sun and shifting high clouds. Very bright.

Starbucks was packed with people, so I have stationed myself at J.P. Licks across the street. The shop is empty except for a mother and son probably 3 years old, both with ice creams. Son has cone; mother has cup. They are in the window seat and I am next to them at a small table.

Outside, an older woman sits at the bench in front of the shop. She is holding a Peet’s coffee and talking to a younger woman (daughter?) in a purple coat who is also holding a Peet’s coffee. A mother with three young children and a Paper Source bag stops outside and looks at the shop. They come inside.

Outside, a third woman joins the other two, and they leave together.

It is impossible to record everything. I miss people and cars passing as I write. I can see them from the corner of my eye but observe nothing about them.

A large woman with a red smoothie comes out of Starbucks.

A teenage girl in a light blue sweatshirt rushes across the street. She has a cell phone and a lanyard with car keys in her hand.

People passing in twos and threes. A young man and woman wait to cross the road in front of the shop. A Honda CRV is parallel parking in front of the Starbucks. The man inside the car is wearing a baseball cap. Cars are parked all along both sides of Central Street.

An Indian man with a stroller passes by. An old woman in a baby pink hat. A woman with her hood up who looks at me looking at her. A mother and her teenaged son—clearly related. An old woman and a very tall, thin teenaged girl, both in cashmere sweaters and Burberry coats (I recognize the plaid).

Two young women, possibly Wellesley students.

A Ford Transit. A Dodge Durango.

Three young men come into the shop.
A Subaru Forester. A BMW. A Chevy Tahoe.

An old man crosses the street in front of the shop. A young man in a baseball cap and sunglasses lifts a toddler in a neon orange hat. A very old woman gets out of the Chevy Tahoe and enters the shop. She is grinning.

The young boy in the window finishes his ice cream cone (slight crunching). His mother is on her cell phone. She sighs heavily.

An old man with a stroller.

The boy in the window lies flat on the bench.

A group of four middle aged women in coats.

Lull.


A mother with two children comes out of Starbucks, all with drinks. The son (7-8?) is wearing a brightly colored crocheted hat.

A Ford F1500 with a snowplow. There is no snow to plow yet, but it is forecast.

It is 2:12. In the act of writing I am missing things. In the act of noticing one thing I am missing another thing.

A huge blue Bud Light truck passes by.

The family of three sits down at the window table. The previous mother and son left earlier. I saw them leave but did not record it (why?). I move one table over, away from the window, to accommodate them. The three young men leave the shop.

A Jeep Grand Cherokee parallel parks in front of the Starbucks. A woman in sunglasses, a knit hat, and a black coat with the hood up passes by.


Two women and a girl pass by. An Asian woman in a hat and her young son are in the shop. I did not see them come in.

The mother and two of her children in the window are arguing about whether one of the children bit the other. The brother says he has been bitten. He accuses his sister. The sister denies it. The
brother accuses me of biting him. The mother says they do not know me. She calls someone on her cell phone and explains the situation. The sister cries. Neither child can speak well.

They leave the shop. I have lost awareness of the flow of the street. A mother and young son have entered the shop. The Asian woman in the hat is in fact an Asian man. He joins the mother and son.

A Honda CRV with tire cover “Kill Beef Eat Hay.” Another Honda CRV. A Subaru Forester. I wonder if some of these cars are circling the block. A teal Mazda CX-9 has parked in front of the shop without my noticing. An old man with a very long beard walks quickly past the shop. He is holding a shopping bag.

A group of three people, all with their hands in their pockets. A group of four people, one with a cell phone in her hand and a Burberry coat.

Two young women sit in the window seat, both with ice creams in cups. They look to be high school age, but could be Wellesley students or other. A mother and her pre-teen son enter the shop.

Two young women pause outside the shop, deliberate, and keep moving.

One of the young women in the window seat accuses the other of being a VSCO girl.


A father with two teenaged daughters. One looks in the window of the shop. The other looks at her cell phone.

A Jeep Grand Cherokee.

The same mother and two children who came out of Starbucks earlier. The child with the brightly colored crochet hat is a girl. I am not as good at detecting gender as I thought. They enter the shop.

A group of four. One woman has a Vera Bradly backpack.


A lull.

It is 2:29.

The street is full of the constant motion of cars in both directions. A large flatbed truck with a single green dumpster chained to the bed passes by. A Dodge Ram. A Volvo XC40. A Mazda CX-9.
Whenever I look down to record one car, another passes by unrecorded. When I record a car, I miss a person. When I record a person, I miss several cars. What else is here that I am missing entirely?

Coats: mostly black. Mostly puffy. Some rain jackets.

Tables: black-painted wood, with many names, words, symbols, and letters carved into their surfaces. They are a strange, blobby shape. Mine wobbles west to east.

Two young men peer in the window of Starbucks, then turn back and walk the way they came. Why? Are they looking for someone?

A Granite Street Realty Corp. pickup truck passes by. Two older women cross the street. One is unusually tall, the other unusually short. The very tall woman has a blue bouclé scarf as a head covering. A woman with a bag rushes by. A woman and three older children leave the shop. A woman in yoga pants and Birkenstocks enters the shop almost simultaneously.

A lull.

The shop stereo is playing “Merry Christmas, Baby.”


A group of three people passes by. Another group of three. A young boy in the shop makes very wet farting noises. Both girls in the window seat are showing each other things on their cell phones while talking. An older boy enters the shop and goes immediately to the counter.

A woman leaves Starbucks, walks one way, stops, and walks back the other way.

A Kinnealey Quality Meats truck passes by.

The Asian man, wife, and son leave the shop. The father helps the boy zip his coat from behind. They pause outside the shop. The father points down the street and they go that way. The older boy leaves the shop without an ice cream.

A Honda Civic. A Jeep Grand Cherokee. A Toyota Highlander with a ski rack. A VW Tiguan. A car I don’t recognize (unusual). A Toyota Camry. A very old Honda Odyssey. A mother with a large shopping bag and young daughter enters the shop. A man and a woman with a Burberry scarf pass by. Two old women walk past slowly and are overtaken by a young blond woman in sunglasses. A young boy and girl enter the shop alone and sit down at the other table.

The teal Mazda CX-9 in front of the shop pulls halfway into the street. A PT Cruiser pulls up behind. It waits for the Mazda. Both leave. An Audi A3 sedan passes by. A Ford Explorer. A BMW 4matic. A woman in a shawl crosses the street, pauses to avoid being hit by a car, then runs the rest of the way. A Toyota Civic.
An older man in a green canvas jacket enters the shop.

Another snowplow. Another leaf mulcher. A Lighthouse Landscape truck.

Two men enter the shop.

A BMW. A Jeep Grand Cherokee. Two young women with matching bags. I recognize one; She is a Wellesley student. Another group of two young women.

Two older women enter the shop. One looks at me. Two girls pass by with frozen drinks and phones in their hands. A man and two women, one in a wheelchair that the man pushes. The woman in the wheelchair has a bright pink hat (Fair Isle). A young woman enters the shop. Three women with two young boys pass by. The two older women leave the shop.

The girls from the window seat leave the shop.

An old woman in a very elaborate black and cheetah print matching coat and hat with large round sunglasses enters the shop.

The young girl looks at the flyers on the wall. Her brother (slightly older) comes to collect her.

A lull.

A mother lets her young daughter drink from her coffee cup. They leave the shop.

It is 2:48.


So far, no birds or animals, or else I haven’t noticed them.

Two men and a young woman sit at the window table. The young woman has an L.L. Bean hat. The woman in the cheetah print coat sits next to me on the other side. The boy and girl now have ice creams. The window table group is quiet. They are all looking at their phones. The young woman mentions that someone they both know has texted her.

A lull.

Pause.
Grade: 35/35

Whoa. This is one of the best papers I've ever gotten in ANTH 101—maybe THE best! It's brilliantly argued and written and takes a very abstract notion and makes it concrete by using anthropological theory to ground it in everyday life. You've effectively translated there into here in a new and exciting manner by employing all of the key themes we've been working with this semester. I feel like you could get this published—it's really quite remarkable. I'm ultra-impressed with your dedication to this idea and the superb execution of this paper. It's truly spectacular. Awesome to the max.