

OTHER NOVELS BY GEORGES PEREC

W or the Memory of Childhood

Things: A Story of the Sixties

A Man Asleep

'53 Days'

A Void

Three

GEORGES PEREC

Life
A User's Manual

Fictions

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
David Bellos

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

(*A favorite*)
O V E R T U R E
in all its parts
Composed by
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LONDON

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Madame Moreau has never told Fleury what she thinks of his work. She will only acknowledge that it is effective, and that she is grateful for his choice of objects, each one of which can easily give rise to a pleasant conversation before dinner. The miniature house is the delight of Japanese guests; the Haydn score allows academics to shine, and the old tools usually set junior trade and industry ministers off onto well-turned phrases on the manual skills and handicrafts of France that live on and of which Madame Moreau is the indefatigable guardian. It is of course Flourens's red piglet skeleton which is the most successful, and people have frequently offered large sums for it. As for the gold coins studded into one of the stair risers, Madame Moreau has been forced to replace them with imitations after

realising that unknown hands have tried, and sometimes managed, to unnaïl them.

Madame Trévins and the nurse have taken tea in this room before joining Madame Moreau in her bedroom. On one of the little low tables there is a round elm-bur tray with three cups, a teapot, a water jug, and a saucer in which a few crackers remain. On the sofa beside it, a newspaper has been folded in such a way as to leave only the crossword visible: the grid is almost entirely blank: only 1 Across, ASTONISHED, and the first part of 3 Down, ONION, have been found.

The two house cats, Pip and La Minouche, are asleep on the carpet, paws stretched out and relaxed, the muscles in their napes quite loose, in the position associated with what is called *paradoxical* sleep, which is generally thought to correspond to the state of dreaming.

Beside them, a little milk jug lies broken in several pieces. One guesses that once Madame Trévins and the nurse left the room, one of the cats – was it Pip? was it La Minouche? or did they join forces for this guilty deed? – knocked it over with a sudden pawstroke, but to no avail, as the carpet instantly drank up the precious liquid. The stains are still visible, indicating that this scene took place just a few minutes ago.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Marcia, I

The back room of Madame Marcia's antique shop.

Madame Marcia, her husband, and her son live in a three-roomed flat on the ground floor right. Her shop is also on the ground floor, on the left, between the concierge's office and the servants' entrance. Madame Marcia has never made any real distinction between the

furniture she has for sale and the furniture she has to live in, and she is therefore busy for much of the time with carrying furniture, chandeliers, lamps, crockery, and miscellaneous objects between the flat, the shop, the back room, and the cellar. Such swaps, occurring as a consequence of opportunities to sell or buy something (in the latter case, in order to make room for it) just as much as on impulse, or a sudden whim, or a change of mood for or against some object, are not performed in random order, and do not exhaust all twelve possible permutations which could be made between the four locations, as is made clear in figure 1; they strictly follow the schema in figure 2: when Madame Marica buys something, she puts it in her domestic space, either in the flat or the cellar; the said object may thence proceed to the back room of the shop, and from the back room into the shop itself; from the shop front it may return to (or arrive at, if it began in the cellar) Madame Marcia's flat. What is ruled out is for an item to return to the cellar, or to get into the front shop without having been in the back room, or to go in reverse from the front shop to the back room, or from the back room to the flat, or, lastly, to move directly from the cellar to the flat.

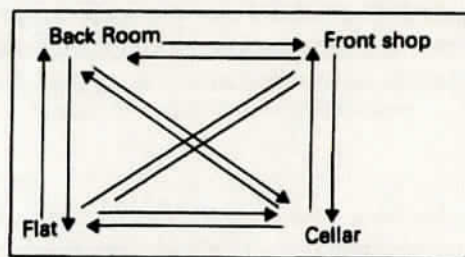


Figure 1

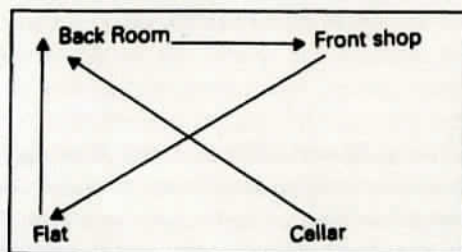


Figure 2

The back room is dark and narrow, with a lino floor, and cluttered to the point of inextricability with objects of every shape and size. The jumble is such that an exhaustive list of contents is impossible, and we shall have to be satisfied with a description of the pieces protruding from this heteroclite heap with a degree of visibility.

Against the left-hand wall, beside the door leading from the back room to the front shop, the door whose opening creates just about the only empty space in the room, there is a large Louis XVI roll-top desk, rather coarsely made; the top is open, revealing a green leather writing pad on which a partly unrolled *emaki* (painted scroll) has been put: it depicts a famous scene from Japanese literature: Prince Genji has got into the palace of the governor Yo No Kami, where, from behind an arras where he has hidden, he watches the governor's wife, the beautiful Utsusemi, with whom he is passionately in love, playing go with her friend Nokiba No Ogi.

Further along the wall are six wooden chairs painted willow green, supporting rolls of printed cretonne wallpaper. The roll on top depicts a pastoral scene in which a peasant tilling his field alternates with a shepherd leaning on his crook, with his hat tilted back and his dog on a lead, with his sheep scattered all around him, and who raises his eyes to the sky.

Yet further along, past the piles of military paraphernalia – weapons, shields, drums, shakos, pointed helmets, knapsacks, belt buckles, frogged wool-cloth hussars' jackets, leather goods, in the middle of which you can see more distinctly a set of those stubby and slightly curved infantrymen's swords which the French call *briquets* – there is an S-shaped mahogany sofa upholstered in flower-patterned cloth, which was given in 1892, so they say, to the singer Grisi by a Russian prince.

Then, taking up the whole right-hand corner, heaped in shaky piles, there are the books: dark-red folio volumes, bound sets of *La Semaine théâtrale*, a fine copy of the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* in two volumes, and a whole set of *fin-de-siècle* books in green and gold board covers, including works signed by Gyp, Edgar Wallace, Octave Mirbeau, Félicien Champsaur, Max and Alex Fisher, Henri Lavedan, as well as the extremely rare *Revenge of the Triangle* by Florence Ballard, which is held to be one of the most surprising precursors of science fiction.

Then, in disorder, on shelves, on little bedside tables, low tables, dressing tables, church stools, card tables, and benches, are dozens and hundreds of knickknacks: snuff boxes, make-up boxes, medicine boxes, and boxes for keeping beauty-spots in; silver-plated metal trays, candleholders, chandeliers, and torches, desk sets, inkpots, horn-handled magnifying glasses, phials, oil jugs, vases, chessboards, mirrors, small frames, Dorothy bags, sets of sticks: whilst in the middle of the room there rises up a monumental butcher's stall on which there stands a beer mug with a carved silver lid and these three naturalist's curios: a huge trap-door spider; an object purporting to be a fossilised dodo's egg mounted on a marble cube; and a large ammonite.

Many chandeliers – Dutch, Venetian, Chinese – hang from the ceiling. The walls are almost completely covered in paintings, engravings, and miscellaneous reproductions. In the penumbra of this room most of the pictures are but a vague blur with, here and there, a signature – Pellerin – standing out, or a title engraved on a plate on the bottom of the frame – *Ambition, A Day at the Races, La Première Ascension du Mont-Cervin* – or a detail: a Chinese peasant pulling a cart, a kneeling youth being knighted by his suzerain. No more than five pictures permit more precise description.

The first is a portrait of a woman, entitled *The Venetian Woman*. She is wearing a dress of flaming-red velvet with a jewelled belt, and her broad sleeve, lined with ermine, reveals her bare arm, which touches the balustrade of a staircase going up behind her. On her left, a tall column rises to the top of the canvas, where it joins a curving mass of architecture. Below, clumps of orange trees, almost black in colour, are dimly visible, framing a blue sky streaked with white clouds. On the carpeted balustrade there is a silver dish containing a bunch of flowers, an amber rosary, and a casket of old, yellowish ivory, overflowing with golden sequins; some of these sequins have fallen on the floor and lie scattered in a series of shining drops, so as to lead the eye towards the tip of her foot – for she is posing on the last step but one, in a natural attitude and full in the light.

The second is a pornographic engraving entitled *The Servants*: a fifteen-year-old boy wearing a kitchen-hand's cap braces himself

against a table, with his trousers round his ankles, as a fat cook buggers him; on a bench in front of the table a liveried valet has unbuttoned his flies and exhibits his erect penis as a serving girl lifts her skirts with both hands and lowers herself onto him. Sitting at the other end of the table in front of a copious dish of macaroni is a fifth character, an old man dressed all in black, who watches the scene with manifest indifference.

The third is a pastoral scene: a rectangular meadow, on a slope, with thick, green grass and a great many yellow flowers (apparently, common dandelions). At the top of the meadow is a chalet, and at the front door there are two women chatting busily, a peasant woman with a headscarf, and a nanny. Three children are playing on the grass, two little boys and a girl, gathering the yellow flowers and making bouquets of them.

The fourth is a caricature by Blanchard, entitled *When Hens Grow Teeth* . . . It shows General Boulanger and the member of parliament Charles Floquet shaking hands.

The fifth and last is a watercolour under the title of *The Handkerchief*, which illustrates a classic scene of Parisian life: in the Rue de Rivoli a fashionable young lady drops her handkerchief and a young man in morning dress – narrow moustache, monocle, patent-leather shoes, a pink in his buttonhole, etc. – rushes to pick it up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Altamont, 2

The Altamonts' dining room, like all the other street-facing rooms in the flat, has been specially set up for the great reception that will be held there shortly.

It is an octagonal room, the four diagonal wall-sections of which hide a great number of cupboards. The floor is laid with glazed red