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Perec, Raczymow, and Their Sites of Memory

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On May 14, 1940, the German bombs that destroyed Rotterdam also erased a long, lively shopping street, the Hoogstraat, killing many of its inhabitants and passersby. The photographs taken after the bombing show a flat expanse of rubble, no single wall left standing. Nowadays, if you go there, you will find a new Hoogstraat, rebuilt a short distance from there. But you can also walk the virtual street—the old one—recently reconstructed on an internet site. After years of research, we know again who lived or had a shop at what number, and for each house number we find a short biography on its inhabitants. This wonderful memory project reminded me of Georges Perec's work on the rue Vilin, in Paris, where he was born. For six years, in the early 1970s, he paid a yearly visit to the rue Vilin to make an inventory of the street, house by house. Of course, there are huge differences with the Rotterdam project: the rue Vilin was not destroyed by bombs, but by urban renewal (although the effect was almost the same). Moreover, his yearly descriptions did not resurrect the street as it was, but witnessed and documented the process of its demolition: these texts are at the heart of his work of memory.

"La rue Vilin" is a series of five texts, originally a part of his experimental project called *Lieux*. He published "La rue Vilin" as a newspaper article

in 1977 and it was republished in his posthumous volume *L'Infra-ordinaire*. The *Lieux* project, of which this text was initially a part, explains many things about “La rue Vilin.” Perec started working on *Lieux* in 1969, when he chose twelve Paris sites for which he had a strong personal attachment and decided to describe these over a range of twelve years, writing two texts a year about each of them. One is a factual description made on the spot (a “Réel”), the other is a series of memories about it, which could be written anywhere (a “Souvenir”). Apart from the rue Vilin, the sites included the Square Franklin Roosevelt, where Perec spent a long day when he fled home as a twelve-year-old boy, and the rue Saint-Honoré, where he lived in an attic as a student, and the Place d’Italie, where he typed his first novel. The aim of it all was both to construct an archive of personal and collective memories and to track change, to see how places and his memories would shift in the course of time. After six years, Perec dropped the project and most of these texts were never published. The seven-hundred-leaves-long manuscript, which also includes series of photos taken on the premises, is kept at the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris.

These two examples—the destroyed Rotterdam and the Paris street, and the work of memory that was done on them—reveal an interesting paradox that occurs to me whenever I turn to the work of French-Jewish postwar authors like Georges Perec, Henri Raczymow, and, of course, Patrick Modiano: the fundamental theme of much of their work is absence, void, the loss of an irretrievable past, but there is one thing that is intensely present, that has a definite fullness—Paris urban space. Their texts are full of precise sites and streets, street names, itineraries, and topography. Theirs is, in Raczymow’s famous metaphor, “memory shot through with holes,” an absent memory, yet writing on urban sites seems an exceptional way to remember. The first question is: why this paradox? Modiano gives a limpid answer in his 1997 novel *Dora Bruder*. His obsessive haunting of the streets where Dora has lived is due to his belief that “premises retain some stamp, however faint, of their previous inhabitants. Stamp: an imprint, hollow or in relief” (21). The second question is: how does this memory work? May sites or premises enable a sort of contact with the past? Is there some kind of metonymy between sites and the memories they retain? Or are they only visible signs referring to an absence, speaking indirectly about it? And how does imagination come in when writers work on their sites of memory? In order to deal with these questions, I will confront two contemporary but very different texts on the same Paris site: the quarter of Belleville, in

northern Paris. One is Perec's work on the rue Vilin, the other is Raczymow's novel *Rivières d'exil* (Rivers of Exile).

The Belleville Neighborhood in the Works of Perec and Raczymow

The Belleville neighborhood is a key site in the work of Perec and Raczymow; they were both born there, the former in 1936, the latter twelve years later, in 1948. But these twelve years of difference make Perec into a child survivor, whereas Raczymow is a "Juif de l'après," a Jew born after World War II, belonging to the second generation. Apart from "The rue Vilin," Perec wrote a few other descriptions of the rue Vilin. In chapter 10 of his novel *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, he recounts a period of almost total amnesia about the rue Vilin, roughly between 1946 and 1962; he had forgotten all about this street, to the point of not being sure where exactly it was located. When he returned there for the first time, in 1962, he did not recognize anything, nor was he able to point out the house where he had lived. A few years later, he returned there by chance, saw that it was on the point of being demolished and took up the *Lieux* project, returning there from 1969 to 1975, just in time to document this demolition.

Whereas the war abruptly put an end to Perec's childhood on the rue Vilin, Raczymow spent his whole childhood in Belleville, in the 1950s. In much of his autobiographical work and some of his novels, Belleville is very present, but most of all in *Rivières d'exil*, a novel published in 1982.¹ Mathieu, its protagonist, is a sensitive young boy growing up in this working-class area where many recently emigrated Jews from eastern Europe were living at the time. Two stories are told here, in alternating chapters: on the one hand are Mathieu's childhood memories of daily life in Belleville, and, on the other, are his grandfather's bedtime "stories from Poland." In a gentle, humorous way, the grandfather, who emigrated from Poland in the 1920s, transmits to his grandson a treasure of tales about Jewish exile. The stories come from the Bible, from Jewish history, but above all from legend. What happened to the ten lost tribes of Israel after the Babylonian exile? What about their 2,000-year wanderings, from Babylon to the Caucasus and from Poland to Western Europe? He also tells him all about false Messiahs and about the incredible story of the Khazars, a Central Asian nomad people who converted to Judaism in the seventh century CE and managed for some time

to maintain an independent Jewish kingdom. He suggests that in the end, all Ashkenazic Jews may descend from these Khazar converts.

Since Arthur Koestler's 1973 book *The Thirteenth Tribe*, the rather controversial Khazar story regularly turns up in public discussion.² However, in the first chapter of *Rivières d'exil*, Raczymow warns that these stories are nothing more—and nothing less—to him than wonderful legends, “an unknown, obscure, nearly crazy genealogy” of the Jewish people, belonging not to memory but to fabulation (9). For Polish Jews, he says, no family genealogy is possible beyond one's grandparents because all roots have been cut off first by emigration and after that by the Shoah, which “erased from all archives the very trace of their passage in the Polish landscape” (10).

At this point, in spite of their difference in age, Raczymow and Perec have their most fundamental experience in common: that of living on the edge of a huge void, of being, in a sense, a survivor (be it first or second generation). In *Writing the Book of Esther*, Raczymow's great novel about second-generation Jews and the Holocaust, the protagonist's postwar family is described as a circle with a hole in the middle; the more the family grows, the more the hole widens itself, becoming the size of “a sea of ashes” (185). This is why, both for Perec and for Raczymow, Belleville has an ambiguous character. In *Rivières d'exil*, postwar Belleville—although it is home and the site of a happy childhood—is also the symbol of a double exile: the exile of his family from Poland—due to emigration and to the Shoah—and historical exile from the Promised Land. Mathieu's grandfather feels “exiled from his own exile” (115). But given this absence of origins, Belleville becomes the only site of memory available, however ambiguous. It is the place where the child feels the presence of several lost worlds: not only the prewar Poland, but also the immemorial past of the exile and peregrinations of the Jewish people. Similarly, for Perec, the rue Vilin is the place where he briefly lived with his mother and family but also where he lost all of them; a place of security but also of destruction. Let us see now how this overdetermination of streets and places works out, on the two levels of proper names and of topography.

The City as a Book

In order to become sites of memory, streets have to be invested with meaning, with language, and, we could say, with desire. The most obvious way in which this happens here is through proper names and text in general.

Streets are full of words. They are text, if one pays attention to street names, house numbers, signboards, words and slogans on walls or fences.

To the child Mathieu in *Rivières d'exil*, Belleville is his world. Many streets in this neighborhood have the name of waters: rue de la Mare (Pond Street), rue des Rigoles (Canal Street), rue du Jourdain (Jordan Street), rue des Cascades (Waterfall Street) . . . To the child, it is absolutely clear why: the neighborhood is one of the most hilly in Paris and these streets are like rivers streaming downhill; they spring from high Belleville, from the rue des Pyrénées—which is paramount to a mountain chain. Like the young hero of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Mathieu is at the age of nouns: he believes that proper nouns correspond to their object; that is why these streets have “wet names” (16). But there is more to it. Proper names *are* what they refer to and in this sense, “the rue du Jourdain *is* the river Jordan itself. And the Jordan is Palestine” (71). This new layer of meaning stems from the stories of the grandfather. In his tales about the wanderings of the Jewish people, rivers play a prominent role: the river Jordan makes Belleville into a kind of Promised Land. Moreover, his stories are full of rivers of exile. According to the grandfather, the migrations of the Jewish people always begin or end in view of a river: first of all, the “Rivers of Babylon,” where, according to the psalmist, the Jewish people lamented their exile.

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept When we remembered
Zion.” (Psalm 137:1)

The grandfather particularly cherishes the story of the mythical river Sabbath, which is said to stop flowing on Sabbath. Later “rivers of exile” are the Vistula, the Volga, the Rhine, and, finally, in the case of Mathieu's family, the Seine. All these stories give a magic aura to the streets of Belleville. This beautiful image of the “rivers of exile” is what tightly knits together both threads of the novel: a childhood in Belleville, on the one hand, and the wanderings of the Jewish people on the other. It also makes clear that Jewish life in Belleville, in the 1950s, is still a life in exile. In its habits, its language—largely Yiddish—and its way of life, this community is still similar to prewar Polish Jewish communities. Ashkenazic Belleville after the war was “a semblance of a shtetl, a simulacrum of Yiddishkeit, [but] a shtetl, a Yiddishkeit shot through with holes, with missing links: the names of the dead” (“Memory Shot Through with Holes,” 102).

In “The Rue Vilin” (Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*), there is no such Proustian fabulating about street names, except of course in his

awareness of the pun: vilin = *vilain*, ugly. “The rue Vilin” is not fiction but a “sociological” inventory of the street. His first aim is to be complete: he wants to “exhaust a Parisian space” (*éprouer un lieu parisien*), to record every slight detail of it, every house, in a factual, neutral style. Only in this way may he document the progressive demolition of this street. In these rather dry listings of facts, one can nevertheless detect a strong investment of emotion and desire, but its style is much more indirect than Raczymow’s. In the first place, this indirectness appears in the house numbers. Perec’s method is the same at every yearly visit: he walks up and down the street and jots down, for every building, what it is. Is it a private house, a shop (what does it sell?), a hotel? Is it still in use or abandoned? Is it shut? This method necessarily makes him come across the two house numbers that are the reason for his presence there: number 1, where his grandparents lived, and number 24, where he lived with his parents and where his mother had a small hairdressing salon. But this principal fact is mentioned only very briefly, between parentheses—and the trauma of his mother’s deportation not at all. His trauma is expressed indirectly, in a subdued, muted way; the letters “Coiffure dames” on the wooden door of number 24, become fainter every year. In Perec’s descriptions, not only number 24 but all house numbers are overdetermined. They come to coincide metonymically with the building concerned, speaking indirectly about the past and becoming expressions of absence. Perec had a fascination for numbers, which he often used as autobiographical signals, as he does here. In his later work, autobiographical elements are often encrypted in numbers, for instance the numbers 11 and 43, which compose the date of his mother’s deportation (on of February 11, 1943). Numbers thus form a numerology and a fantasmatic arithmetic, recurring in many of his works (see Magné, 1999).

Signboards are another type of texts that make a street speak, even when it is dying like the rue Vilin. Some refer—in a comical way—to the hilly character of Belleville: in the upper part of the rue Vilin, there is the wine and charcoal shop “Au repos de la montagne,” and even the “Hotel du Mont-Blanc”! But most of these signboards refer to the past, when Belleville was a flourishing working-class area with many shops and workshops. Some of these signposts now seem ironic, like the electrician’s sign advertising “Power and Light,” but plunged into darkness (Perec, 2008, 215). On number 27, he notes “a shop, closed, ‘La Maison du Taleth,’ with, signs in Hebrew still to be seen and the words MOHEL, CHOHET, BOOKS, STATIONERY, RELIGIOUS OBJECTS, TOYS” (214). One would expect here a translation or short explanation of those Hebrew words—*taleth*, or prayer shawl; *mohel*, or ritual circumcisor; *chohet*, or ritual slaughterer—but

Perec gives none, as if to say that they have lost their meaning in this neighborhood and at this time, where traditional Jewish life has almost disappeared. It may also be taken as an indication of Perec's conception of his own Jewish identity as he expressed it in *Ellis Island Revisited: Tales of Vagrancy and Hope*: "[B]eing Jewish is not a belonging, it is not related to a belief, to a religion, a way of life, a folklore or a language; it is rather a silence, an absence, a question, a putting into question, a hesitation, a disquiet" (Perec, 1994, 58, my translation).

In Raczymow's novel, Belleville is still teeming with (Jewish) life. Rue de Belleville is "full of life, of shops, of pedlars, of glaziers who shout: Here comes the glazier! of knife-grinders, of chair-menders, of ice-cream sellers, of red and golden books, a street full of things to see" (Raczymow, 1982, 95). Perec's rue Vilin, only ten years later, seems an empty, dying place.

(Re)mapping Belleville and the rue Vilin

Topography is another way in which Belleville becomes a site of memory in these two texts. Both Perec and Raczymow give great importance to the shape, to the spatiality of the neighborhood or street. But they do this, again, in entirely different ways. In *Rivières d'exil*, Raczymow does not return to the premises but takes an imaginary walk through Belleville, resurrecting its colorful inhabitants. Imagination invests urban space with meaning, giving it an aura of exile. Perec, in contrast, is a lonely, obsessive walker. His recurring visits to the rue Vilin have a single aim, which remains unsaid: by describing them every year, he hopes to force his memory to produce some recollection of his mother and of their short common life there. That is why the *Lieux* project not only includes descriptions of the present state of a site, written on the premises but also recollections of people or events belonging to it. The "Souvenirs" of the rue Vilin have never been published; they are only available in manuscript (see Lejeune, 1991). Studying them at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris, I was struck by how meager and confused they are (Schulte Nordholt, 2008 and 2016). In these texts, relying only on a faulty memory and refusing to verify facts (this was part of the rules of the *Lieux* project), Perec is in total confusion about crucial details. Was he born in the rue Vilin or in another, nearby street? And to what arrondissement did the rue Vilin belong? How old was he when he left for his hiding place in the Alps? And so on. Perec's childhood memories, as they are told in *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, may seem slight/insignificant and uncertain, but turn out to be quite substantial!

His inability to remember anything about his parents and childhood may explain why Perec wanted to be so precise and exhaustive in his writing. The first sentence of chapter 10 in *W, or the Memory of Childhood* also reveals his will to establish topographical facts, however meager and banal they may seem: “We lived in Paris, in the 20th arrondissement, in the rue Vilin; it is a small street starting at the rue des Couronnes and going uphill, while vaguely tracing the shape of an S, to the steep stairs leading to the rue du Transvaal and the Olivier Metra Street [. . .]” (Perec, 1995, 67, my translation). This cartographic precision about the premises is even clearer in the five descriptions composing “The rue Vilin.” Here he acts as a true geometrician, estimating the angle of inclination at different points of the street, measuring its length between side streets and accurately describing the two turns and their incline: “On the odd number side, on the left, level with number 49, the street bends for a second time, also through about 30 degrees. This gives the street the general appearance of a very elongated S (like in the high tension symbol SS)” (Perec, 2008, 215).

The manuscripts show that, on location, Perec made several sketches of the shape of the street. It was only later that day, in a café, when he copied out his notes, that he added the comparison to the SS symbol. Years later, Robert Bober, a friend of Perec’s, made a striking film on the rue Vilin, *En remontant la rue Vilin* (1992). In this ode to Perec, where he reconstitutes the street using hundreds of old photographs, he also examines the shape of the street from the air and discovers that it does not at all have the shape of an S! In spite of Perec’s near-scientific approach of the rue Vilin, his description of it is saturated with the imaginary and the past, making it into a fantasmatic street, a symbol of trauma and loss.

Whereas Perec sees the SS symbol in the shape of his street, Raczymow’s topography of Belleville is altogether different but is also marked by a geometrical figure heavily loaded with symbolism, the Jewish star: “The windows of the dining room of 71, rue de la Mare, look out on a small square where one may take a rest, when one is tired of ascending the long way from low to high Belleville. It is like a small square of the David’s star, if you like.” My translation alas cannot account for the pun in this sentence: “C’est comme une minuscule petite *place de l’étoile* de David, si on veut” (Raczymow, 1982, 47, my emphasis). Here, Raczymow implicitly refers to the title of Patrick Modiano’s first novel, *La place de l’étoile* (1968). Modiano’s title refers both to the famous Paris square and to the yellow star and finally, to the Magen David as a symbol of Jewish identity. Taking up all these different layers of meaning, Raczymow underscores the last one,

seeing the shape of the Jewish star in the form of Belleville streets. Here—at least in the 1950s—he seems to say, there still was a Jewish land, a kind of homeland, with its river Jordan and other geographic memory markers, even if it was a land of exile. Belleville is indeed a homeland because these streets are called “les rues de par chez soi,” the familiar, everyday streets.

Raczymow then gives us a playful guided tour of this star of streets. After the rue des Envierges, we come to the rue Botha, “where the movie *Casque d’or* was made with the beautiful Signoret and the skinny Reggiani” and then to the stairs of the rue Vilin “where *Le ballon rouge* was shot with kids of the Levert school, and from where one sees the whole of Paris” (Raczymow, 1982, 48). This approach—making memories surge from sites—is comparable to that of Perec in his “Souvenirs,” the main difference being that memories seem to freely flow in Raczymow’s case, whereas in Perec’s they seem to have dried up entirely.

Both authors apprehend urban space by projecting symbolical forms on it, be it the SS sign or the Star of David. Both of them also give a great importance to roaming through the city, according to precise, predetermined trajectories. Walking the streets of Belleville, whether literally, like Perec, or in the imagination, like Raczymow, is a privileged way of experiencing the neighborhood. In his 1974 essay “Species of Spaces,” Perec called himself “a user of space” (“un usager de l’espace”). This active conception of urban space is closely related to the findings of the French anthropologist Michel de Certeau. In his famous inquiry on daily life, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he showed how everyday experiences like walking the streets, consuming, living, or cooking are “practices” through which we “invent city space”: in many, often playful, ways, we create spaces of our own, and personal and collective forms of appropriation of them. This is certainly also visible in the texts we are considering here. Another one of the rules of the *Lieux* project, underlying Perec’s descriptions of the rue Vilin, is the obligation to return every year—in principle for approximately twelve years—to the same street, and to walk it through, always in the same direction, from the bottom to the top, making an inventory of all the buildings, number by number, as we have seen. Perec has thus established beforehand a trajectory meant to be repeated once a year, like a pilgrimage; the intended result of this being the creation of some kind of archive of memory.

In Raczymow’s case, we see something similar: the memories of the child’s daily trajectories through the neighborhood map the space of daily life. In *Rivières d’exil*, an invisible frontier seems to divide upper and lower Belleville. This is, first, perceived as a social divide: the narrator lives with

his parents in the more elegant upper quarter, whereas his maternal grandparents still live in the lower quarters, in a tiny apartment and workshop where they collect and repair rags. The child is therefore forever walking from one address to the other, using different, but always preestablished itineraries. How then does the child “invent” his own city spaces? For him, these humble streets become a ground where he goes treasure hunting: with his grandfather, who is a rag picker, he explores the trash cans in search of things to sell; at other times, he roams the gutters, which magically become “rivers of precious or archaeological objects: screws, needles, old coins with a hole in the middle, pieces of industrial metal” (Raczymow, 1982, 94–95), all to become part of his private collection of “useless waste objects, but loaded with journeys, wanderings, exiles, fugues and transits” (95).

Let us now return to Modiano’s dictum about how sites retain a stamp of the people who lived there. We may say that in Raczymow’s case, this stamp is in relief, present and visible. The Belleville he describes is “shot through with holes,” but it still is—or rather was—a neighborhood teeming with life and stories, and these stories are told in a direct, uncomplicated way, often in daily conversation. On the contrary, in Perec’s meticulous descriptions of the rue Vilin, the stamp of its former inhabitants—especially of the unnamed mother—is hollow, their absence is felt everywhere, but it may only be expressed indirectly, by means of street numbers, fading signboards, and the uncanny shape of the street. This account of the demolition of a street is a perfect metaphor of absence, Perec’s central theme. In short, *Rivières d’exil* is a “happy” text, whereas Perec’s texts on the rue Vilin are profoundly melancholy. Apart from their very different personal history, the reason for this may be that Raczymow allows his childhood memories to be invested with imagination and the power of literature: by means of the tales on Jewish exile, they become inhabited, enchanted. In Perec’s attempts to describe the rue Vilin, nothing of the like is allowed to happen. However precise his descriptions are, the street remains empty and desolate; it is unable to make memory speak.

Notes

1. All quotations from *Rivières d’exil* are my translations.
2. Recently, for instance, the books of the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand (2009 and 2012) gave rise to a great deal of controversy.

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