



“ For years you think talking means finding, discovering, understanding, understanding at last, being illuminated by the truth. But no: when it takes place, all you know is that it is taking place; it’s there, you’re talking, you’re writing: talking is only talking, simply talking, writing is only writing, making the shapes of letters on a blank piece of paper. – Georges Perec

Nameless Library.

Scripturient

Exformation: the information we leave out



What would be the work of an exformation professional? How would we address all that we ourselves exclude, overlook, put aside, take for granted?

I JOTTED down a phrase: “The Pataphysical Library”. I thought one day it might lead to something, but it never did. I bought Andrew Huggill’s *Pataphysics: A Useless Guide* from MIT Press in preparation. I’ve gone years without ever cracking the cover.

The blurb tells me pataphysics is “the science of imaginary solutions and the laws governing exceptions”. The French writer Alfred Jarry coined the term, but it’s hard to more fully define, entangled as it is with games from Jarry’s boyhood, mock-metaphysics, and parodies of science.

It led, nonetheless, to a movement of artists and writers, as committed to “learned and inutilious research” as they are to expanding the frontiers of knowledge: the Collège de ‘Pataphysique.

The idea that knowledge would have frontiers to expand, and a secure heartland from which intrepid researchers could quest towards the unknown, sits oddly with pataphysics anyway. When he wrote of gravity, Jarry asked us to imagine, not a body falling towards a centre, but emptiness rising towards a periphery.

On 24 November, 1960, a subcommittee of the Collège was formed to address experimental literature, and became the basis for Oulipo, “the workshop of potential literature”.

Members of Oulipo have written work under strange and arbitrary constraints, of which the most famous might be Georges Perec’s *La disparition*, a novel written entirely without using the letter “e”. Founding member Raymond Queneau called Oulipians “rats who construct the labyrinth from which they plan to escape”.

I learned a new word in lockdown last year, from the design professor Cassini Nazir: *exformation*. It was at the heart of his keynote to the 2021 Information Architecture conference. You can watch the talk online.

Nazir didn’t coin the word, but found it in a book by the Danish writer Tor Nørretranders, *The User Illusion*. Nørretranders defines exformation as “explicitly discarded information”. When we communicate with one

another, he points out, we leave much unsaid, “many considerations – thoughts, feelings, and facts – which are not present but nevertheless are. Information that is not there, yet nevertheless is.”

When our child emerges from the school gates on the day of an important test, if we simply ask, “How did it go?”, context makes our meaning clear. The additional material needed to make sense of the question, all that we didn’t say when we spoke those four words, is exformation.

“For four years, from May 1971 to June 1975, I underwent analysis,” Perec, who was a prolific crossword compiler and whose day job was in a medical research library, tells us in his short piece *Backtracking*. “It had hardly finished when the desire to say, or more exactly to write down, what had taken place assailed me.”

Yet each attempt confounds Perec, “bogged down every time in ever more tangled rhetorical devices”, and he questions his urge to make the private talk of therapy public.

He describes, instead, the neighbourhood in which his therapist’s office was situated; and in doing so he tells us about everything bar the details of what passed between him and the therapist.

“I have nothing to say about that underground place,” he writes of the eventual revelation which came about in therapy. “The analyst heard what I had to say to him, what for four years he had listened to without hearing for the simple reason that I hadn’t been telling him – I hadn’t been telling it to myself.”

What would be the work of an exformation professional? How would we address all that we ourselves exclude, overlook, put aside, take for granted? Where are our blindspots, our negative spaces? What is concealed by taxonomy? Does the library have an unconscious?

Vladimir Nabokov wasn’t a member of Oulipo, as far as I know, but he was no stranger to literary games. My first thought is of *Bend Sinister*, a strange little book Nabokov wrote in Massachusetts at the tail end of the Second World War.

Set in an explicitly imaginary Central European nation, whose leading philosopher is urged to make a public statement in support of the country’s dictator. He refuses and is enticed and



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threatened by the regime, escalating to an irreversible tragedy.

Just at the moment of greatest despair, and a fraction of an instant before a fatal bullet hits home, Nabokov steps away from “the chaos of written and rewritten papers” and gives up on the tale, reminding us that this story and its world are being constructed at his desk in Wellesley.

Looking from the window, he sees water gleaming under a streetlamp: “an oblong puddle invariably acquiring the same form after every shower because of the constant spatulate shape of a depression in the ground.”

“Possibly,” he reflects, “something of the kind may be said to occur in regard to the imprint we leave in the intimate texture of space.”

In Perec’s novel *Life, a User’s Manual*, the narrative covers a single moment in time within a Parisian apartment block, moving between its rooms according to a predetermined rule. At the book’s climax, a man who has devoted decades to an elaborate project completing hundreds of jigsaw puzzles dies, just as he discovers that the final gap in the current puzzle has the shape of the letter X, and the piece in his hand has the shape of the letter W.

In the first district of Vienna, on the Judenplatz, sits a concrete bunker created by the artist Rachael Whiteread: a memorial called the Nameless Library.

Its walls are cast from bookshelves, giving form to negative space: a library turned inside-out, illegible, unnavigable, the spines facing away from us, its doors sealed, with no handle to turn and release. **IP**