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How to cite this publication
Please cite the final published version:


Publication metadata

Title: The Values of Imperfection
Author(s): Mads Rosendahl Thomsen
Journal: Comparative Critical Studies
DOI/Link: 10.3366/ccs.2021.0404
Document version: Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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The Values of Imperfection

MADS ROENDAHL THOMSEN

ABSTRACT

Georges Perec’s *La Vie mode d’emploi (Life: A User’s Manual)* was famously based on a number of meticulously crafted lists, including a list of errors that should be made in the writing of each chapter. The engagement with imperfection in Perec’s novel is central in the way it balances structure and composition with random and exchangeable elements and throughout his work the random plays a significant role. In this article, I will move from Perec’s work to a wider discussion of the values of imperfection in two distinct domains: the idea of the classic and the vision of the posthuman.

KEYWORDS: Randomness, Imperfection, Poetics, Narratology, Posthumanism, Georges Perec

1. RANDOMNESS AT LARGE

The topic of randomness is exciting and daunting, but also liberating. Academics are so often concerned with making things cohere and finding the right critical perspectives that there is something the random that sets things free. Georges Perec’s work is the center of this article, where I will consider the uses of randomness and its companion imperfection, but I would like to share the two first thoughts that came to mind after having been challenged to take on the subject of randomness.

The first was that ‘random’ has entered the Danish language in the past few years. Even though Danes often talk about the anglicization of the Danish language (with ‘hygge’ as the only significant export) and that many people do try to spice up things by injecting an English word here and there, I do not think anglicization is that pronounced. But ‘random’ has become something that
not only a lot of young people use but a word that a colleague of mine can (and will) use in an everyday sentence. A headline in a newspaper used it by quoting a person complaining “Det er lidt ulækker at en random person kan finde alt om mig” (“It is a bit gross that a random person can find everything about me”). So “random” is something people say all the time in Danish now, even though the Danish word “tilfældig” (close to the German “zufällig”) would do the trick.

My own personal first encounter with the concept of randomness came back in the mid-1980s when I like so many other young people of my generation had a Commodore 64 computer and tried to figure out how to program those sixteen colors that were available and do other things with the machine in the BASIC programming language. I was fascinated that there was a random function: that you could insert a line of code that would give you a random number from a machine which was otherwise designed to carry out instructions and follow the code time and time again and run it perfectly. And still, the machine would have the need to be able to do something that is random, so much against its nature. It did so by checking its internal clock when the random function was called up and then taking the last decimals of the clock to produce a random number that would rely on at what millisecond a human had asked the program to run, technically simple and sound. The whole idea of randomness and that it has a function, even in what we consider to be the most structured system, was an understanding that came very hands-on with a computer.

Randomness has many uses wide and far also in other disciplines. I will not go too far outside of the field of literature, but as an avid listener, I do think that some of the attraction of, for example, the music of Keith Jarrett (and many others) is the balance between melodies and elements that comes to him as he plays. The structure that that comes with standards as they are deconstructed. There is a whole poetics hidden here: randomness on its own is too easy. If you argue for an aesthetics of pure randomness, where the random should be the new rule, this is in many ways is too easy and sets the bar too low. N. Katherine Hayles, speaking a few years ago at Aarhus University on electronic
literature, took issue with the glorification of randomness, and without sounding like a Hollywood script doctor, she did argue that if there is no coherence, there is no hook in the work, and although one can admire the radicality or the principle in the work based on a program of pure randomness, it does not work as a texts that people, honestly, would like to read from the beginning to the end. Even if we are fascinated by randomness, we still need a balance of something that make things cohere in a certain way. Maybe that is the oldest plot in the world: “I met a random girl and now I cannot live without her.”

2. PEREC BETWEEN PLAN AND CHANCE

In literature, one could say that randomness can be produced as an effect for the reader and this is very much a part of Perec’s work. In this respect, one obviously has to mention an all-important inspiration for Perec and fellow member of the avantgarde literary group OuLiPo, Raymond Queneau. His *Cent mille milliards de poèmes (A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems)* consists of fourteen lines forming a sonnet but with ten different options for each line. By changing them haphazardly this creates a sense of randomness in what one is reading. It is perfectly possible to read all 140 lines of the book, but impossible to read all combinations (which would take more than a thousand lifespans), and as a result there the sense of system and sense of randomness co-occurs.

A contemporary Danish writer and admirer of both Perec and Queneau, Peter Adolphsen, has published a work entitled *A Million Stories* which works on the same principle and also has ten different choices for each line, which does have some strange cohesion. The book even comes with a ten-sided die so that readers can toss her or his die and make the way through the stories with making any deliberate choice of theirs. Again, one could not read all permutations in a lifetime, but that is of course not the point. The sense of randomness collides with the sense of sublime vastness of the narrative space.
Perec, who lived far too short a life and died at the age of forty-five in 1982, worked with randomness and imperfection in different ways. I will comment on three of his works before turning to his main work *La Vie mode d’emploi (Life: A User’s Manual)*, followed by some more general observations I think can be taken from this involvement with randomness and imperfection.

Whereas Queneau and Adolphsen in the two examples on randomness create an effect for the reader of reading a random poem or story, one also has to assume that their texts are very deliberately planned and written. Perec on the other hand experimented with processes that would capture the random events of life. In *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien (An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris)*, Perec tried to make the experiment of “exhausting” a place in Paris. Carried out in 1974, it simply consisted of him sitting in the Place St. Sulpice taking notes of what happened. Of course, he did edit his notes and expand them, and he did enter the observations with various strategies for writing, but it is also quite obvious that he really just let what happened influence the text in a form of real-time writing. This obviously carried with it a lot of randomness, even though one could say that his obsession with which busses that came in and left is not completely random, but something he would have known. But the very idea of trying to isolate a slice of time and see what happens there is a really interesting way of creating literature and obviously letting in the randomness.

Another author who has not attempted to write in that way but also had the desire to see what happens and what are the structures that comes out from a random slice of time is Nicholson Baker in his novel *Room Temperature*. The novel is based on the premise of imagining that everything in a life could be contained by describing a random twenty-minute period. In Baker’s novel this just happens to be twenty minutes of rocking his newborn baby to sleep, so maybe not that random after all but certainly an attempt to say that maybe there are structures in there for whatever time we choose to describe:
I certainly believed, rocking my daughter on this Wednesday afternoon, that with a little concentration one's whole life could be reconstructed from any single twenty-minute period randomly or almost randomly selected; that is, that there was enough content in that single confined sequence of thoughts and events and the setting that gave rise to them to make connections that would proliferate backward until potentially every item of autobiographical interest—every pet theory, minor observation, significant moment of shame or happiness—could be at least glancingly covered; but you had to expect that a version of your past arrived at this way would exhibit, like the unhealthily pale frog, certain telltale differences of emphasis from the past you would recount if you proceeded serially, beginning with “I was born on January 5, 1957,” and letting each moment give birth naturally to the next. The particular cell you started from colored your entire re-creation.7

Perec wrote another famous book Je me souviens (I Remember) that in different way enacts the conflict between structure and randomness in what is seemingly just rambling series of random memories. All sentences of the book begin with “I remember”, something that creates the moving and beautiful mesmerizing effect of being intimate with the person who speaks.

35. Je me souviens du match Cerdan-Dauthuille.

36. Je me souviens que la ville d’Alger s’étend entre la pointe Pescade et le cap Matifou.

37. Je me souviens qu’à la fin de la guerre, mon cousin Henri et moi marquions l’avance des armées alliées avec des petits drapeaux portant le nom des généraux commandant des armées
ou des corps d’armées. J’ai oublié le nom de presque tous ces généraux (Bradley, Patton, Joukov, etc.) mais je me souviens du nom du general de Larminat.

38. Je me souviens que Michel Legrand fit ses débuts sous le nom de “Big Mike”.

35
I remember the Cerdan-Dauthuille match.

36
I remember that the city of Algiers stretches from Pointe Pescade to Cap Matifou.

37
I remember that at the end of the war, my cousin Henri and I marked the advance of the Allied armies with little flags bearing the names of the generals commanding the armies or the army corps. I've forgotten the names of almost all of these generals (Bradley, Patton, Zhukov, etc.) but I remember the name of General de Larminat.

38
I remember that Michel Legrand made his debut under the name of “Big Mike.”

Part of the fascination with the book also stems from, I believe, that the small things and the big things in life mix together, and that the reader is left to figure out what is really important and what may not have been that important after all. There are things that refer to his personal life, to popular culture. Some memories lead back to his earliest childhood, while others must be from adulthood as
they reference figures that only become known in the 1950s or 1960s, such as Claudia Cardinale and Fidel Castro. The tone is usually unsentimental, and given how much trauma Perec had suffered, they are often more quotidian and neutral, if slightly nostalgic. Most of all, they are a testament to the wealth of seemingly contingent memories that occupies the human mind.

Through the compilation of all these memories, *I remember* creates a sense of randomness in what is brought forward, but on the other hand one has to think about memory works and how are we shaped by our memories. The reader is invited to contemplate what is random in the way that our memory is processed, and whether the flash bulb memories that our subconscious delivers to our consciousness are random elements, or if there is there some pattern, a trace or structure behind it all that we can capture. In his style of writing, Perec thus brings to the fore the mystery of how our minds work and how our memory is organized. It also suggests a poetics of memory with a balance of memories of that are not too overdetermined where everything has a purpose and fits neatly into a larger structure, but on the other hand is more than haphazardly collected recollections, in other words, they are more than random. Perec’s book is extreme in the way it highlights personal memory in the struggle between necessary and contingent elements, and in many respects, it is also a one-off in its form, although very interesting in its pursuit of finding a way to express the paradox that small and big memories are all part of life.9

Perec was obviously more than a chronicler of the randomness of the everyday, but a survivor of the Holocaust. He was Jewish with parents who had emigrated to France from Poland. His mother was killed in a concentration camp, presumably Auschwitz, and before that his father died during the first days of the war as a French solider. There is thus a vast trauma looming over his persona which also permeates his works, not least so in the partly autobiographical *W, Ou la souvenir d’enfance* (*W, or the Memory of Childhood*).10 It is a complex novel, short, but with many layers. The book is split in two narratives, one fictional allegorical about the island W, and one that chronicles Perec’s own
recollection of his childhood. The novel goes back and forth between these two narrative strands, only to be tied together at the very end. At the beginning, the autobiographical parts are the most dramatic, whereas the quest of finding and later describing the island W becomes more and more dramatic as the history of W is revealed. The island is in many ways structured as a concentration camp with imprisonment, discipline, starvation, punishment, and strict hierarchies. At the same time, it is also a community that revolves around athletic competitions as if this was the Olympic village. In this manner, Perec merges, in a provocative but profound manner, two aspects of Western history that are usually held most apart: classical ideals of peaceful competition and the industrialized punishment and murder of people.

Some of the most moving parts of the book has to do with this mixture of what is seemingly random, and what afterwards seems to be extremely important. Things that could not be known in the moment but was just taken for being part of the everyday. This is no more apparent in his memory of seeing his mother for the last time at a train station in Paris, where the memory of parting is entangled with the seemingly unimportant recollection that she gave him a Charlie Chaplin magazine in order not to be bored during his long journey south to safety:

De ma mère, le seul souvenir qui me reste est celui du jour où elle m’accompagna à la gare de Lyon d’où, avec un convoy de la Croix-Rouge, je partis pour Villard-de-Lans : bien que je n’aie rien de cassé, je porte le bras en écharpe. Ma mère m’achète un Charlot intitule Charlot parachutiste : sur la couverture illustré, les suspentes du parachute ne sont rien d’autre que les bretelles du pantalon de Charlot.

The only surviving memory of my mother is the day she took me to the Gare de Lyon, which is where I left for Villard-de-Lans in a Red Cross convoy: though I have no broken bones, I
wear my arm in a sling. My mother buys me a comic entitled Charlie and the Parachute: on the illustrated cover, the parachute's rigging lines are no other than Charlie's trouser braces.\textsuperscript{11}

The insignificance and randomness of the magazine that he was given becomes connected with one of the most pivotal moments of his life, and there is a certain sadness to this being the only surviving memory. There is also a realism to this: even tragic or heroic moments are entangled with unexpected objects, irrelevant information and so on, but trying to distill the essence of a moment could be futile. The contexts should be told, too, or something else will be lost.

Another passage of \textit{W} also explores this sort of interweaving of the really important with the insignificant and random. Perec conveys this in a very moving way by printing a sketch of his own life, which he wrote when he was seventeen. Set in a different font from the rest of the book, it reads like the document from his youth it is, and it is followed by twenty-six notes about how he knows better now in his late-thirties. He corrects his younger self who did not get things completely right, but the corrections are usually very minor and the whole exercise becomes a display of how difficult it is for Perec to get any closer to the parents he lost. The hope of really seeing his father and his mother more clearly is not achieved, and he cannot get closer to them; all he can do is pile up random corrections of minor facts. Still, writing in the 1970s, he insists that this has value, simply by bearing testimony to their existence:

\begin{quote}
J’écris : j’écris parce que nous avons vécu ensemble, parce que j’ai été un parmi eux, ombre au milieu de leurs ombres, corps près de leur corps ; j’écris parce qu’ils ont laisse en moi leur marque indélébile et que la trace en est l’écriture : leur souvenir est mort à l’écriture ; l’écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l’affirmation de ma vie.
\end{quote}
I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life.¹²

This balance between memory and between having a structure in life but also acknowledging that even the most traumatic elements are also weaved together with things that are seemingly insignificant becomes a central part of his aesthetics, and even more so in his most important work *La Vie mode d'emploi*.

3. PLANNED IMPERFECTION

*Life: A User’s Manual* is a beautiful but misleading title. Maybe it is a good manual, but it is certainly also a confusing and complex one in all of its ninety-nine chapters that take reader in many directions. The work – which Perec classified as ‘novels’ in the plural – relies upon a well-structured plan for the different chapters but also a significant engagement with imperfection and randomness. Among the many rules and lists that helped structure the book, Perec made sure to let events from his everyday life during the time of writing influence the chapters, thereby making sure that seemingly random elements would be a part of the novel. This idea that even though it is not clear to the reader that a certain element is related to something that went on in Perec’s life when he wrote the novel, it would be something that would influence the writing and perhaps make it better or truer to a spirit of both pre-determined and affected by external events.

The famous plot – if it is a plot – of the novel is a journey on an extended chess board of ten times ten squares that each refer to a room or a place in the staircase of this imaginary building in Paris, where each chapter follows one another not based on a thematic logic, but on the movement of
an imaginary knight that touches all fields, or rooms, just once. There is one chapter missing, which is quite deliberate since for all rules that were set up for this book there was also directions of how they had to be broken, and so there had to be a missing chapter. A principle of imperfection is thus installed in everything, something which took an enormous amount of planning, although the novel itself was written quite quickly in about a year and a half. Perec’s many lists ensured that the book would be extremely diverse and far-reaching, and really give off a sense of being encyclopedic (although real encyclopedias contain much more information). They also make sure that this diversity of references, stories, objects, etc. would be distributed across the novel, although they were also complemented with a system for making errors in abiding by the rules.

The play between the random and the coherent and systematic is also remarkable at the level of the stories that are being told. Thematically, it is worth noting that there are quite a few that have to do with the imperfection of the human, or with ideas of perfect heroes but also the impossibility of that:

Gratiolet voudrait créer un héros de roman, un vrai héros ; non pas un de ces Polonais obèses ne rêvant que d’andouille et d’extermination, mais un vrai paladin, un preux, un défenseur de la veuve et de l’orphelin, un redresseur de torts, un gentilhomme, un grand seigneur, un fin stratège, élégant, brave, riche et spirituel ; des dizaines de fois il a imaginé son visage, le menton décidé, le front large, les dents dessinant un sourire chaleureux, une petite étincelle au coin des yeux ; des dizaines de fois il l’a revêtu de costumes impeccablement coupés, de gants beurre frais, de boutons de manchette en rubis, de perles de grand prix montées en épingle de cravate, d’un monocle, d’un jonc à pommeau d’or, mais il n’a toujours pas réussi à lui trouver un nom et un prénom qui le satisfont.
Gratiolet would like to invent a proper hero, a true romantic hero; not some pot-bellied king of Poland absurdly obsessed with sausages and slaughter, but a true paladin, a doughty knight, a defender of women and orphans, a righter of wrongs, a parfit gentleman and a noble lord, a brilliant strategist, a man of elegance, courage, wealth, and wit; dozens of times has he thought up a face for him, with a determined chin, a broad forehead, teeth showing in a hearty smile, and a twinkle in the eyes; dozens of times has he clad him in impeccably tailored outfits with pale-yellow gloves, ruby cufflinks, tiepins tipped with priceless pearls, a monocle, a gold-handled crop, but he still hasn't managed to find him fitting first and second names.\textsuperscript{14}

There are stories about hopes for the future but also a sort of a defeatist idea about that that we can never make things or people perfect. There are stories of crazy ideas of building a cult that will eventually take over the whole world, or people imagining why the human body should be different to a degree that it would no longer be quite human.

On a formal level, it is important that Perec could have made a much more incoherent novel had he wanted to. Having set up this wonderful machine for an encyclopedic vision of the world, it would have been the easiest thing for him to just go on to tell all the different small stories that he could come up with. Yet, there is a big story that weaves itself through the whole novel and provides a red thread that had not needed to be there. The story is on the other hand a small story: an eccentric millionaire, Bartlebooth, whose name is derived from different sources, including Herman Melville’s Bartleby, is not really interested in anything. He has planned for his life – really a user’s manual – and according to this he spends ten years learning to paint watercolours, twenty years painting five hundred portraits of seascapes or ports, and then for twenty years solving puzzles made of the very same watercolours. After the puzzles have been assembled, they are dissolved in a special fluid and he would ideally be left with fifty years of work that amounted to five hundred pieces of plywood
This plan is, says the narrator of the novel, carefully thought out to be moral, logical and aesthetic. Moral in the sense that it would not be heroic or spectacular, aesthetic in having no purpose but simply go from nothing to nothing. Finally, it is said to be logical:

[E]xcluant tout recours au hasard, l’entreprise ferait fonctionner le temps et l’espace comme des coordonnées abstraites où viendraient s’inscrire avec une récurrence inéluctable des événements identiques se produisant inexorablement dans leur lieu, à leur date.

[A]ll recourse to chance would be ruled out, and the project would make time and space serve as the abstract coordinates plotting the ineluctable recursion of identical events occurring inexorably in their allotted places, on their allotted dates.15

This fixation on control, which is obstructed, is very much in line with the book’s embrace of the imperfect. A major “plot” of the book is the way that puzzle maker Gustave Winckler plays all kinds of tricks with Bartlebooth to make it harder for him to solve the puzzles, a point on which the book leaves the reader. At the end of the day, Life: A User’s Manual can be read as praise of all the random choices that people make but in which they somehow find meaning or give meaning to without making a big fuss about it. It is a celebration of the ability to live with things being contingent and of the extraordinary in the ordinary, something which is backed up by a compositional element. It is an attempt to make the coherent, the random, and the imperfect coexist. The status of Perec’s work and in particular this novel has only grown throughout the years, for a number of possible reasons. One of the primary among these would be, in my opinion, that the novel appears to fulfil readers’ need for a balance between order and chaos.
4. IMPERFECT MASTERPIECES AND POSTHUMANISM

From Perec and his engagement with imperfection and randomness, I will in conclusion address two topics which can be developed from the overall theme. One has to do with a more intrinsic way of thinking about the literature, classics and perfection, and another is more external and is related to the field of posthumanism.

In *Signs Taken for Wonders*, Franco Moretti considers *The Waste Land*’s use of different materials and its seeming imperfection and contingency. Moretti could have drawn on other works where the status of being a masterpiece of literature, both in the sense of public recognition and the actual reading experience, is combined with a sense that many of the elements of the work is exchangeable. In the case of *The Waste Land*, it has a very clear structure and draws on mythical mythology and knowledge, but on the other hand there is the sense of being a collection of contingent, random elements, which in a profoundly goes against the grain of a certain way of evaluating literature. The sense of purpose, wholeness and so on is not immediately clear in such works, among which I also count *Life: A User’s Manual*.

Instead, the idea of a flawed masterpiece is highly useful, also when looking back at the long history of literature. If we look for perfection in Shakespeare, we are also bound to see the flaws, just as when we read Dante or Cervantes, we encounter things for which we cannot find an exact purpose but we have to acknowledge that there are a lot of elements of characterized by randomness and things that crept in not as part of a larger plan, but which have to be understood as part of the whole. Maybe it is this opening for the random and for the imperfect. If one takes this idea even further – which I did in a short essay from 2011 – one could make the argument that the foundational text of world literature or at least of the Western canon to large degree is built up on works that have a certain subversive nature; a trait that goes against every narrative that claims to be perfect and instead has a critical subversive side to it. The argument can even be extended to theology, where it has been argued
that The New Testament is subversive in the sense that it brings God closer to humans by presenting him in human form. Acknowledging all these things that we do not usually consider to be signs of mastery and or essential to masterpieces not only brings a profoundly humane element to literature, but does so within an aesthetics that we have come to praise, and which has a strong element of tampering with idea of perfection, all of which is at full display in Pèrèc’s work.

Aside from the world of books and classics, I believe there is a strong ethical element to the ways that we appreciate perfection and imperfection on a wider cultural scale. The discourse of transhumanism is often involved with perfecting the human future based on technological imagination, something of which I think most people are afraid. But it also raises the important question of what it means to perfect. There is no certainly no lack of illustrations of what we could imagine and how could we perfect ourselves, whether it is in the perfection of bodies, mental capacities and to a lesser degree, very tellingly, to our not so altruistic morals. Literature, comics, films and television have a plethora of these, although usually not uncritical. The criticism of perfection is often lacking in transhumanist discourses that are optimistic about solving problems whereas literature often suggests utopias that are dystopias. What I think is important here is to acknowledge that we really do not know exactly what we mean by perfection, and that it is very important not to have a too limited an idea about what perfection means. One could say that the implicit argument running through Pèrèc’s work is that a perfect lazy afternoon in Paris looks like has nothing to do with these beautiful visions of perfect humans but he insists that the friction of the everyday is really something that should be appreciated in all its imperfection and randomness. Or that, as Pèrèc lays it out elsewhere, we should embrace the imperfection of the human:

Le deuxième projet appartient au domaine de la métaphysique : dans le but de démontrer que, selon l’expression du professeur H.M. Tooten, “l’évolution est une imposture”, Olivier
Gratiolet a entrepris un inventaire exhaustif de toutes les imperfections et insuffisances dont souffre l’organisme humain : la position vertical, par exemple, n’assure à l’homme qu’un équilibre instable : on tient debout uniquement à cause de la tension des muscles, ce qui est une source continuelle de fatigue et de malaise pour la colonne vertébrale laquelle, bien qu’effectivement seize fois plus forte que si elle était droite, ne permet pas à l’homme de porter sur son dos une charge conséquente ; les pieds devraient être plus larges, plus étalés, plus spécifiquement adaptés à la locomotion, alors qu’ils ne sont que des mains atrophiées ayant perdu leur pouvoir de préhension ; les jambes ne sont pas assez solides pour supporter le corps dont le poids les fait ployer, et de plus elles fatiguent le cœur, qui est obligé de faire remonter le sang de près d’un mètre, d’où des pieds enflés, des varices, etc. ; les articulations de la hanche sont fragiles, et constamment sujettes à des arthroses ou à des fractures graves (col du fémur) ; les bras sont atrophiés et trop minces ; les mains sont fragiles, surtout le petit doigt qui ne sert à rien, le ventre n’est absolument pas protégé, pas plus que les parties génitales ; le cou est figé et limite la rotation de la tête, les dents ne permettent pas de prise latérale, l’odorat est presque nul, la vision nocturne plus que médiocre, l’audition très insuffisante ; la peau sans poils ni fourrure n’offre aucune défense contre le froid, bref, de tous les animaux de la création, l’homme, que l’on considéré généralement comme le plus évolué de tous, est de tous l’être le plus démuni.

The second project is in the field of metaphysics: with the aim of showing that, in the words of Professor H.M. Tooten, “evolution is a hoax”, Olivier Gratiolet has undertaken an exhaustive inventory of all the imperfections and inadequacies to which the human organism is heir: vertical posture, for example, gives man only a precarious balance: muscular tension alone keeps him upright, thus causing constant fatigue and discomfort in the spinal column,
which, although sixteen times stronger than it would have been were it straight, does not allow man to carry a meaningful weight on his back; feet ought to be broader, more spread out, more specifically suited to locomotion, whereas what he has are only atrophied hands deprived of prehensile ability; legs are not sturdy enough to bear the body’s weight, which makes them bend, and moreover they are a strain on the heart, which has to pump blood about three feet up, whence come swollen feet, varicose veins, etc.; hip joints are fragile and constantly prone to arthrosis or serious fractures; arms are atrophied and too slender; hands are frail, especially the little finger, which has no use, the stomach has no protection whatsoever, no more than the genitals do; the neck is rigid and limits rotation of the head, the teeth do not allow food to be grasped from the sides, the sense of smell is virtually nil, night vision is less than mediocre, hearing is very inadequate; man’s hairless and unfurred body affords no protection against cold, and, in sum, of all the animals of creation, man, who is generally considered the ultimate fruit of evolution, is the most naked of all.19

Aside from the humorous (and true) account of the human physique, Perec provides a caring account of how we can better deal with imperfection and see it as valuable, and where the arts play role in providing an antidote to sterile theories of progress. This will be quite important in the years to come as biotechnology will continue to produce new fantasies of the perfect human. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism,*20 that I edited with Jacob Wamberg, ends with a section on artistic responses to the uses of technology and the ways of thinking about the human that the posthuman leads us to. Across the many contributions, the joys of the imperfect, of the random, and of the contingent are often singled out. Most of all, it may be important that storytelling seems to be one of the last things we would give up: if one imagines that we would be living as simulations or bodyless creatures or something like that, it is highly probable that the way storytelling gives humans the ability
to navigate in time and space outside of what is just at hand would be essential. That is exactly of course where the novel, as well as storytelling in film, functions, as a distinctive way making sense of the world and presenting it through narratives. My argument is thus that one of the foundations of having a narrative is that it cannot be about a perfect world. There has to be something to talk about, there has to be something that goes wrong, something that creates friction, very often also just a random element that comes in. A random element that shows that a perfect world is actually one with narratives, and thus it has to be imperfect in other ways, and certainly have a good dose of randomness to go with that.

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9. Peter Adolphsen paid homage to Perec with his *Jeg kan ikke huske (I Cannot Remember)* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2018).
11. Ibid., p. 41 (English translation p. 26).
12. Ibid., p. 59 (English translation p. 42).