

Reconceptualizing the Everyday in French Literary Fieldwork: Intersections of Buddhism, Daoism and French Literary Practice*

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This article explores the intersections of Buddhism, Daoism, and contemporary French literary practice in the study of the everyday (*quotidien*). Since the 1980s, French literature has increasingly shifted its focus from the exotic to the mundane, engaging with theoretical frameworks developed by scholars such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. Drawing on Buddhist notions of emptiness and dependent arising, as well as Daoist principles of *yin-yang* interdependence, the article bridges Eastern and Western philosophies to demonstrate the everyday not as a static or trivial backdrop, but as a dynamic and transformative space. It further examines how representations of daily life in the works of Georges Perec and Jacques Roubaud employ the meticulous documentation of mundane details to uncover hidden patterns, rhythms, and structures of human experience. Through literary fieldwork, Perec and Roubaud challenge conventional perceptions of the everyday, unveiling its depth, complexity, and potential for reinvention.

Keywords: intersections, everyday, documentation, literary fieldwork, reinvention

Introduction

The question of the everyday has been central to French culture and literature for several decades. Since the 1980s, inquiries into the *quotidien* (the everyday) across various genres have gained considerable prominence in France. Writers have increasingly favored new perspectives on human existence, shifting their focus from the exotic to the immediacy of daily life. This engagement with the ordinary has given rise to diverse works, including Pierre Sansot's *Les Gens de peu* (1991), Marc Augé's *Un Ethnologue dans le m'áro* (1986), and François Maspéro's *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990), among others. A common thread among these approaches is their significant reliance on theoretical frameworks and intellectual traditions developed in preceding years, particularly the cultural and philosophical discourses of Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, and Michel de Certeau. The growing literary and theoretical engagement with the *quotidien* prompts a fundamental question: what constitutes "the everyday"? Beyond familiar notions of repetition, rhythm, and ordinariness, does the everyday encompass an additional dimension yet to be fully explored?

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The Philosophy of Everyday Life: Bridging East and West

Maurice Blanchot declares in *L'Entretien infini* (1969) that “le quotidien échappe, c’est sa définition” (the everyday escapes: that is its definition) (p. 359). He sees indeterminacy as the everyday’s predominant characteristic and considers the experience of everyday life as a process of “devenir perpétuel” (perpetual becoming) (1969, p. 363). The everyday is a sphere of fluid present; it is “inépuisable, irrécusable et toujours inaccompli et toujours échappant aux formes ou aux structures” (inexhaustible, irrefutable and always unaccomplished, always eluding forms or structures; Blanchot, 1969, p. 357). Blanchot frequently employs the term “mouvement” (movement) to emphasize the dynamic potential inherent in the *quotidien*. His observation aligns with the thinking of many other theorists. There is a lot of research to underscore the opacity, ambivalence, and dynamism of the everyday; beneath its apparent repetition lies a concealed richness. In this regard, Henri Lefebvre (1961) notes that “c’est dans la vie quotidienne et à partir d’elle que s’accomplissent les véritables créations, celles qui produisent l’humain et que produisent les hommes au cours de leur humanisation: les œuvres” (it is in everyday life and through it that true creations take shape, those that produce humanity and that human beings generate in the course of their humanization: works; p. 50). This notion of creation rooted in the everyday was a central theme among the French Surrealists.

If everyday life resists immediate recognition, “c’est sa visibilité ordinaire qui le rend invisible, en nous laissant croire que tout y est déjà manifeste” (it is its ordinary visibility which renders it invisible, letting us believe that everything is already manifest within it; Bégout, 2005, p. 21). As “un ensemble indéterminé des possibilités humaines” (indeterminate ensemble of human possibilities; Blanchot, 1969, p. 364), it unfolds through the constant exchange of “l’accoutumé et de l’insolite, source de surprise et de tension” (the familiar and the unexpected, a source of surprise and tension; Macherey, 2005, p. 10). The vibrant nature of everyday existence also matches the Buddhist view of emptiness, which posits that all entities undergo a continuous process of growth and decay and are thus devoid of intrinsic essence. In the Theravāda tradition, the notion of “dependent arising” signifies that “an entity lacks an intrinsic being” and “conditioned entities have arisen dependently” (Pandit, 2008, p. 121), through interdependent relationships. Nāgārjuna extends this philosophical framework by equating “dependent arising” with “emptiness”, asserting: “Because there is nothing which is not a dependent arising; there is nothing which is not empty” (Pandit, 2008, p. 121). For Nāgārjuna, existence always denotes a phenomenal or relative mode of being rather than an absolute one. Consequently, all phenomena are transient:

This analysis of phenomena is intended to demonstrate that neither the individual beings nor entities enjoy any kind of ontological status, which is to say that none of them is rooted in or constituted by an eternal, and thereby permanent substratum (Pandit, 2008, p. 121).

From a Buddhist perspective, the nature of reality is one of continuous becoming, characterized by dynamism and impermanence. Buddhism functions as an “égalisateur, annihilateur des différences” (equalizer, annihilator of differences; Kone, 1998, p. 198), rejecting extreme viewpoints in favor of the Middle Way, an approach that navigates between absolutism and nihilism. In this sense, emptiness is closely linked to transformation: because entities lack inherent existence and possess no fixed identity, they remain in a perpetual state of flux. Consequently, our understanding of the everyday cannot be confined to any singular definition,

whether framed in terms of transcendence or repetition. The apparent stability of quotidian experience is, ultimately, an illusion:

As long as the things of the world are used for everyday, practical purposes, their illusory nature may and usually does go completely unnoticed, though some unforeseen change can momentarily upset the day-to-day routine of expectations (Huntington & Wangchen, 1992, p. 57).

The Mādhyamika's claim that the world is akin to an illusion provides a profound conceptual framework for understanding the nature of the everyday. While everyday life, in its repetitive nature, often goes "unnoticed", it is within this very realm that there exists potential for "the exceptional, the exotic, the marvelous" (Sheringham, 2006, p. 23)—"unforeseen change" that disrupts the mundane. Contrary to being static or unchanging—traits often associated with descriptions such as "boring, habitual, mundane, uneventful, trivial, humdrum, repetitive, inauthentic, and unrewarding" (Sheringham, 2006, p. 23)—the everyday is, in fact, a dynamic arena marked by continuous differentiation ("the ideal, the imaginary, the momentous" (Sheringham, 2006, p. 23)). It cannot be simply categorized as either ordinary or extraordinary, but rather exists between these extremes, in an ongoing process of transformation.

In Chinese philosophy, Daoism employs the *yin-yang* dialectic, commonly symbolized by a circle divided into halves of black and white, to convey the idea that seemingly opposing or contrary forces are, in fact, complementary, interconnected, and interdependent within the natural world. These forces are seen as mutually constitutive, each giving rise to the other through their reciprocal interaction. *Yin* represents the passive and negative force (associated with qualities such as femininity, darkness and water), while *yang* encapsulates the active and positive force (associated with masculinity, light and fire). They symbolize the symbiotic relationship and harmony found in nature, demonstrated by the interplay of night and day: "Neither can exist without the other, and neither is inferior to the other" (Yang & Lu, 2007, p. 250). The *yin-yang* dialectic forms the underlying principles and patterns of all existence, with everything in the world being a manifestation of this non-dual unity: "the myriad creatures carry on their backs the *yin* and embrace in their arms the *yang*" (Lau-Tzu, 1963, p. 49).

Yin and *yang* bear notable parallels to the Buddhist conception of form and emptiness, as articulated in the Heart Sutra: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (Lopez, 1998, p. 93). While Buddhism encourages transcending dualistic thinking by recognizing the emptiness of all phenomena and their intrinsic oneness, Daoism delves into this "oneness" by formulating the *yin-yang* theory. When applying the principles of *yin-yang* theory to the everyday, one might consider what elements correspond to *yin* and which to *yang*. The concept of a *yin-yang* balance may be interpreted in various ways. One potential interpretation could involve characterizing the focus on the mundane as *yin*, while the pursuit of the unusual aligns with *yang*. In light of this, it is worth noting the recent proliferation of project-based works in France, many of which engage with literary fieldwork to explore the ordinary and the everyday. With the aim of unveiling "the present, the unresolved matter of what is still in progress" (Gratton & Sheringham, 2005, p. 99), these works employ spatial and temporal constraints to examine public spaces and focus on what is most familiar:

Ground rules, *contraintes* in French, serve a key role in project work... The constraint can be fairly simple—spending three days noting down everything going on in a Paris square, or making a list of all the food consumed in a year or all the bedrooms one has ever slept in. But one of its functions is to focus on what is generally overlooked, on what Perec called the "endotic" by contrast with the "exotic". (Gratton & Sheringham, 2005, p. 99)

Authors engage in experimental methods by observing and documenting everyday life without preconceived expectations or judgments about the outcome. These projects encourage open-endedness, which resonates with the inherently elusive and unpredictable nature of the *quotidien*. By focusing on the ordinary, these authors uncover the hidden depth within seemingly trivial moments, revealing how the mundane can offer profound insights into human existence.

The Poetics of the Everyday in French Literary Fieldwork: Repetition and Flux

French authors engage with the notion of *quotidien* in diverse ways. Since the 1980s, numerous literary works have been situated within the genre of literary fieldwork, blurring the boundaries between fiction and autofiction while drawing upon the lived experiences of both the writer and the public. By intertwining individual and collective memory, these works redirect our attention toward the “excès de réel” (excesses of reality; Gratton & Sheringham, 2005, p. 50), which constitute the very fabric of everyday existence. Unlike the surrealists, who celebrate the incursion of the marvelous into reality, contemporary authors—Georges Perec, for instance—retain their capacity for wonder while meticulously examining the banalities of everyday life. In October 1974, Perec anticipates what Dominique Viart later describes in his 2005 study on contemporary French literature as a return to reality. To this end, he positions himself at Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris’s 6th arrondissement, where, over the course of three consecutive days and at varying times, he endeavors to “épuisier” (exhaust) the site by recording the ordinary spectacle of the street:

Mon propos dans les pages qui suivent a plutôt été de décrire le reste: ce que l’on ne note généralement pas, ce qui ne se remarque pas, ce qui n’a pas d’importance: ce qui se passe quand il ne se passe rien, sinon du temps, des gens, des voitures et des nuages. (My aim in the following pages has been, rather, to describe what remains: what generally goes unnoticed, what is imperceptible, what seems unimportant: what takes place when nothing appears to happen, aside from the passing of time, the presence of people, the movement of cars, and the drifting of clouds; Perec, 1982, p. 12)

His notes from these three days follow a consistent format—date, time, location, and an inventory of observable elements—where regularity rhymes with coincidence. This methodical approach allows for the observation of patterns in the ordinary, shedding light on the often overlooked nuances of daily life. The uniformity of this format evokes a sense of temporal continuity, yet the presence of randomness and spontaneity offers a deeper insight into the fleeting, transient aspects of life, where even the smallest details become part of a larger, often invisible narrative:

Date: 18 October 1974

Time: 12 h. 40

Location: City Hall Café

[...]

A 63 pass

6 sewers (helmets and waders) take Street of the Cans

Two available taxis at the taxi stop

An 87 pass

A blind man coming from the Street of the Cans passes the cafe; it’s a young man, with steps fairly assured.

An 86 pass

Two men with pipes and black bags

A man with a black satchel without pipe

A woman in a woolen jacket, hilarious

One 96

Another 96 [...] (My own translation) (Perec, 1982, pp. 18-22)

The regular trajectories of buses reflect the repetitive routine deep-rooted in everyday life. As Bruce Bégout observes in *La Découverte du quotidien* (2005), “Quotidien désigne en latin ce qui arrive tous les jours, tout ce qui se répète jour après jour. La répétition dans le temps et dans l’espace définit donc en première approximation le quotidien” (The everyday denotes in Latin what happens every day and everything that repeats day after day. Repetition in time and space thus serves as a primary definition of daily life; p. 40). At the same time, the movement of buses alternates with that of anonymous passers-by, reinforcing the cyclical nature of urban existence while throwing into relief the unexpected flow of individuals. If Maurice Blanchot, as Sheringham notes in *Everyday Life* (2006), conceives the city street as a microcosm of the modern world, it is because it embodies human anonymity and is not ostentatious (“n’est pas ostentatrice” (Blanchot, 1969, p. 363)). On the contrary, “tout s’annonce, tout se dénonce, tout se fait image” (everything is announced, everything is denounced, everything becomes an image; Blanchot, 1969, p. 363) as reflected in the mundane realities transcribed in newspapers. The *quotidien* is not a site of “events,” which are by nature exceptional. Instead, it is often understood as a neutral terrain where nothing remarkable occurs, a space inhabited by transient figures who lack predefined identities. This anonymity is further underscored in Perec’s writing through the frequent use of indefinite pronouns, which emphasize the indistinct, collective presence of individuals. Additionally, the impersonal pronoun “on”—as in “on prépare la journée nationale des personnes âgées” (preparations are underway for the National Day of the Elderly; Perec, 1982, p. 30)—along with indefinite adjectives—such as “plusieurs grand-mères gantées ont poussé des landaus” (several gloved grandmothers pushed prams; Perec, 1982, p. 30)—work together to dissolve individual identity, reducing figures to archetypes within the everyday landscape. Meanwhile, the unpredictable ebb and flow of pedestrians introduces an element of spontaneity, as fleeting, unplanned encounters disrupt the otherwise structured cadence of urban life, reinforcing Perec’s fascination with the tension between order and randomness in the city’s fabric.

In *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (1982), Perec emphasizes the banal dimensions of everyday life, seeking to unravel the underlying rhythm that governs seemingly random repetitions. He invites us to adopt the role of spectators, cultivating a heightened sense of contemplation that deepens our awareness of the ephemeral. Banality is not merely a passive backdrop but a defining attribute of the *quotidien*—it provides stability and serves as a point of reference, both individually and collectively. Yet, embedded within this structured routine is an element of unpredictability. In Perec’s work, no two moments are ever truly identical; the smallest variations, chance encounters, and unexpected interruptions introduce a sense of surprise that disrupts the monotony of daily life. This enumeration of banal occurrences not only enriches his own approach to writing but also inspires new forms of literary experimentation and lays the groundwork for future authors, such as Jacques Roubaud, whose works continue to explore the delicate coexistence of repetition and spontaneity, transforming everyday reality into a literary playground where patterns emerge and dissolve, and where the act of writing itself becomes an engaging, constantly unfolding process.

Jacques Roubaud’s *Tokyo infra-ordinaire* (2005) transcends the boundaries of traditional travel literature, focusing on the minutiae of everyday life to construct a narrative that fuses memory, perception, and cultural

exploration. The text's attention to the mundane is not an end in itself but a means of uncovering the deeper patterns and flows that define urban existence. Through its hybrid structure blending prose and poetry, the text captures the intricate interplay of banality and discovery, repetition and novelty, exploring the nuances of urban existence. This approach also situates the work within a more expansive critique of global homogenization, emphasizing the value of cultural particularity in an increasingly standardized world.

The structure of *Tokyo infra-ordinaire* is fundamentally shaped by an embedded narrative technique, which integrates "choses vues", "images-souvenirs" and "images-mémoire" (things seen, memory-images, and memory-composites; Roubaud, 2005, p. 24) into a cohesive literary framework. This hybrid poetics, as a branching network of digressions and reflections, embodies Roubaud's intent to navigate the layers of Tokyo not as a distant observer but as an immersed participant in its daily flow. It also enables him to intertwine immediate perception with recollection, allowing for the simultaneity of past and present happenings. Central to this exploration is the Yamanote Line—the circular railway that loops around Tokyo—serving as both a literal and empirical framework. Roubaud's station-by-station approach turns each stop into a node of digressive movements, revealing the city's layered temporality within the rhythm of urban transit.

Roubaud's attentiveness to the micro-events that give form to urban landscape parallels the way his text is structured-layered, recursive, or fragmented and enables him to make detailed enumeration of observations (a multitude of everyday scenes such as vending machines, bustling commuters, small urban parks, the fleeting image of a child's solitary presence in a crowded station, etc.) that might otherwise go unnoticed. This meticulous observation is reflected, moreover, by the description of the "salarymen", which is essential to understanding Japanese business culture: a crowd of salarymen spills forth from the station in a rhythmic flow, like the "artère" (arteries; Roubaud, 2005, p. 81) of a city's body, where each individual merges into the collective pulse of urban life. Such moments are not remarkable in themselves but gain significance through their inclusion in a broader narrative of regularity and order.

The everyday details, far from mundane, take on a poetic resonance, enriched by their connections to memory and reflection. While repetition is often associated with monotony, Roubaud employs it as a structural device to emphasize the dynamic nature of the ordinary. By juxtaposing the immediacy of real-time observations with the reflective depth of memory-images, Roubaud creates a text that oscillates between the static and the fluid, forging connections between seemingly disparate elements of Tokyo's urban fabric. The Yamanote Line's circular trajectory becomes a metaphor for this perpetual reinvention of the everyday, where the familiar is continually rediscovered. For instance, his descriptions of Tokyo often evoke memories of other cities, such as London, his "preferred city", creating a network of associative connections that transcend spatial and temporal boundaries:

10 1 2 Je note, en plus, des points de ressemblance avec ma ville préférée, Londres, London

(I also note similarities with my favorite city, London)

10 1 3 vastness

10 1 4 quartiers (neighborhoods) seemingly uniform but with their own character, subdued, impassibles (impassive); flegme (stoic); they do not stare

[...]

10 1 7 sabbiness too in a lot of places, houses

10 1 8 old gentlemen dozing over their newspapers on park benches, comme dans Green Park (like in Green Park) (Roubaud, 2005, pp. 13-14)

This layering of past and present, of here and there highlights the universal rhythms of urban life while grounding them in the particularities of Tokyo. These embedded layers deepen the text's engagement with the infra-ordinary, blending observation, memory, and cultural engagement to construct meaning from the mundane. By attending to the everyday, Roubaud challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with the mundane, offering a richly layered account of Tokyo that is both deeply personal and universally resonant.

Georges Perec and Jacques Roubaud succeed in disrupting habitual perceptions of the everyday, prompting a reconsideration of the assumed familiarity with the world. Through their literary fieldwork, they develop innovative approaches to documenting and interpreting *quotidienneté* (everydayness), revealing its depth, complexity, and potential for reinvention. Perec, in particular, foregrounds the banality of daily life, carefully cataloging its overlooked details and recurring patterns to expose the underlying structures that govern human experience. His attempt to exhaustively describe a single Parisian location in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* exemplifies his method—transforming the seemingly mundane into a subject of literary and philosophical inquiry. Roubaud, on the other hand, extends this investigation by integrating mathematical constraints and personal memory into his exploration of the everyday, highlighting the relationship between order and spontaneity. Their work celebrates unpredictability, reinforcing the idea that the *quotidien* is not merely defined by routine but is also shaped by chance, subjective perception, and narrative reinvention.

As Michel de Certeau argues in *L'Invention du quotidien* (1990), the everyday is intrinsically linked to inventiveness, expressed through various aspects of daily life such as clothing, decoration, spatial circulation, work practices, and social interactions. It thus fosters a reflection on human potential. Henri Lefebvre (1961) likewise asserts that the everyday undergoes qualitative transformations that shape lived experience, underscoring the necessity of attentiveness to the present moment. This attentiveness, akin to the mindfulness cultivated in Buddhist philosophy, allows the ordinary to be infused with meaning. The Zen proverb, “When walking, walk. When eating, eat,” encapsulates this idea—suggesting that a deliberate, reflective engagement with daily activities can illuminate the everyday from within, allowing it to be “reborn, illuminated with meaning and beauty” (“la (la vie quotidienne) transformer de l'intérieur pour qu'elle renaisse illuminée de sens et de beauté” (Todorov, 1993, p. 146). Engaging with the everyday inevitably raises questions of *art de vivre*—the principles by which we shape and experience our own existence.

Conclusion

The everyday is not a fixed or static entity; rather, it is in a continuous state of transformation and cannot be reduced to the sterile repetition that often defines its conventional depiction. An extensive representation of the *quotidien*, as articulated in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, must foreground the ambiguity inherent in everyday life and embrace open-endedness. Through this approach, literature does not simply document the everyday but actively participates in its reinvention, encouraging a more profound engagement with the world. Literary fieldwork plays a crucial role in capturing the fluidity, contradictions, and creative potential of the everyday. By merging fiction with tangible reality, it allows for a nuanced exploration of the *quotidien*, challenging us to see the everyday not as something to be passively inhabited, but as a dynamic and

ever-evolving landscape, where meaning is constantly being constructed, disrupted, and rediscovered. The everyday, much like space, undergoes constant metamorphosis. Documenting traces of the quotidian “non pas au niveau de ses réflexions lointaines, mais au cœur de son émergence” (not in terms of distant reflections but at the very heart of its emergence; Perec, 1985, p. 23) serves as a privileged means to ground our concrete existence within its rhythms and transitions, while preserving the ephemeral, trivial moments of life as they flow by.

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