

BOOK REVIEW

The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise.
Author: Georges Perec.
Translated by David Bellos.
London: Verso, 2011

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The author Georges Perec is best known as a leader of the oulipo movement of French experimental writers. In the early part of the twentieth century, a dominant force in French literature was surrealism, which maintained an aesthetic ideology of freedom that was perhaps best represented by the technique of automatic writing. In such writing an author put down on paper whatever words came into his or her mind in order to supposedly unleash a Freudian id unconstrained by faculties of conscious sense-making. Although the oulipoian writers often have created texts which seem similar to those of the surrealists in their lack of conventional order and sense, their procedure has been to impose constraints rather than disregard them. Influenced by the elaborate procedures used by Raymond Roussel, also a major influence on the surrealists, they forced their writing to follow strict and often arbitrary rules which prevented or limited free expression. Perec, for example, is known for a palindrome, a text that reads identically from the front to the back and from the back to the front, of 5,561 letters,. His most famous book, *La Disparition*, translated into English as *A Void*, does not at all use the letter 'e', a particular achievement given the French

language's dependence on that letter. These works are obviously fascinating as literary exercises, but they often have a significance that goes beyond the performance of a technical feat. The disappearance referred to in the title of his liopgramic novel implicitly refers to the actual disappearance of his parents into the German death camps during World War II.

It is perhaps no accident that such concerns with reason and unreason, rules and freedom from rules, should play such an important role in French literature. The French intellectual tradition has a very strong rationalist current, perhaps best represented by the philosophy of Rene Descartes, and this is reflected in its literature, as with the alexandrines of Racine and more recently, for example, by the music of Pierre Boulez, which sought to control all aspect of the sound of the piece through a series of set rules. It is almost inevitable that a tradition which emphasizes such constraints would also generate reactions against such constraints. These reactions can be found, for example, in the outlaw poetry of Franois Villon, the visionary experiments of Arthur Rimbaud, and the irrationalist experiments of the surrealists and Dadaists.

An important culmination of the rationalist philosophical tradition was found in the development of formal logic and from this logic the languages of computer programs. Indeed, those who see the mind as at least analogous to the computer insofar as thought can be characterized as a series of operations upon formal symbols which act as representations are often characterized as modern Cartesians, albeit Cartesians of a particularly materialist cast. It is therefore not surprising a systematic writer like Perec would at some point come to terms with computational procedures.

This occurs in Perec's comic novella *The Art and Craft of Approaching your Head of Department to Submit a Request for a Raise*, which appears on the cover in shortened form as *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise*. This text was originally published in a French journal in 1968, first published in book form in 2008, and it has recently appeared in a first, presumably necessarily somewhat loose, English translation by Perec's biographer David Bellos. The title in full or shortened form explains precisely the premise of the book, a formal consideration, as if produced to provide an outline of a computer program designed to accomplish this particular task of career management. The English edition in fact provides a flow chart which seemingly provides a clear delineation of the procedure in a series of conditional junctures of the form of questions like "Is Mr. X in his office?" with determined courses of action for the alternative answers of "yes" or "no". That the procedure proposed by the book will be one of comic failure can be seen as the final crucial action: "ASK FOR AN INCREMENT", is followed in the flow chart

not by alternatives but by a definite "no" which is followed by "Are you given reasons for hoping" either answer of which of leads into "WAIT SIX MONTHS" and then back to the beginning. An alternative path, which does not even get to the critical question, also leads back to the beginning. Thus, the program not only provides no hope for a raise but raises the possibility of the most serious of programming problems: an infinite loop. Through its comic consideration of bureaucratic life the book inevitably recalls the work of Franz Kafka and as in that work there can never be a final resolution of the bureaucratic task.

That the procedure outlined in the novella turns out to be absurd is not surprising. Faced with a difficult and potentially emotionally trying task the purpose of an expert system should be to simplify its complexities into a manageable simplicity. Yet this would require creating a simple model of a world and of situations that are inherently complex. Faced with a boss who does not ask one to sit down when one enters his office one would typically attempt to read his motivation and look for an appropriate way of responding based on what one knows about the boss, one's relation to him, and the business context in which he is operating. Learning to read such complexities is, for example, at the heart of the Aristotelian system of ethics and is why Aristotle and later members of his tradition reject theories which hold that practical decision making can be reduced to a series of rules or commands. In computer science this complexity is often called "the frame problem" and involves the computational difficulty of representing the total body of potentially relevant facts and mak-

ing decisions about which of these are actually relevant. In the quest for simplicity the system devised in the book focuses on one quite unlikely response to this problem – asking the boss whether one of his daughters has the measles; and if the answer is negative, then asking whether two, three, or four daughters have the measles, temporarily avoiding another potentially infinite loop by the arbitrary declaration at the fourth iteration that “enough is enough”. Even where the loops are not infinite, the decision tree of the book constantly turns back on itself, leading to a text in which absurd behaviors are repeated over and over again as the ‘character’ traverses its junction point.

A continual refrain of the book is the statement “we must do our best to keep things simple”, but as the loops continue despite the determined rejection of the complexities of the world the situation gets more desperate. Once an initial move is made from the abstract symbol ‘y’ to the more concretely novelistic ‘Ms. Wye’ “to give a touch of human worth to our schematic demonstration” the loops and absurd decision trees take on an emotional character expressed on page 52 as two of the continually looped options are combined in the judgmental “... or even circumperambulate the various departments which taken together constitute the whole or part of the company in whose wheels you are at most a minuscule cog let us grant to keep things simple”. In the end, the unnamed even by letter employee said to be looking for a raise is affirmed to be engaged in a lifelong project in futility. This Kafkaesque sense of a bureaucratic loss of humanity is further emphasized when it is suggested that

Mr. X faces the same situation in asking for a raise from Mr. Z, his own boss, suggesting perhaps the existence of another potentially infinite chain, this time of increasingly higher authority.

It is ironic that this comically despairing portrayal of corporate life and the aspiration to capture that life in the language was originally published in a technical journal that addressed issues in computer-assisted learning. While the novella is directly concerned with a corporate rather than an educational environment it must be read as providing a skeptical view of the utility of a programmed approach to any complex personal and social situation. Its message seems to be that any attempt to reduce such situations to a simplicity that makes them amenable to algorithmic programming will lead the user into a labyrinth of absurdity. As someone expert in the manipulation of constraints for artistic purposes Perec is the ideal writer for this satire.