Classification, Roy Boyne
Abstract

First thoughts about classification inevitably turn to the simultaneously mundane and extraordinary ambition to capture the universe of all that there is and has been. This dream of the universal has two basic modes (and so the process begins!). We will follow the spirit of *theos* and *logos* as represented by the Platonic embrace of totality enshrined in Socrates' scrupulous rejection of rhetorical dishonesty. Secondly we will address the later part of the march to subjectivity as expressed by the mechanics of atomism and Cartesian reduction. Following this move from theology to ontology, from in other words the post-synthetic to the post-analytic, we will connect with the sociological destruction of such pretensions to absolute classificatory veracity – a necessary pre-requisite for the engagement of reflexivity and classification to be found in the work of Georges Perec.

Key words: classification, representation, identity, subjectivity, universals

Classification

Roy Boyne

Introduction

Durkheim and Mauss (1969: 5) thought that classification has a history. To be more accurate, it has histories. I will refrain from attempting to classify all the histories of classification that research might produce, for that would surely take us into Borges' *Library of Babel.* Instead I will provide just two examples. For some mathematicians, classification analysis is used to identify structured groups within data. Mathematical techniques of cluster and classification analysis are used in economics, medicine, biology, astronomy, marketing, indeed all disciplines and projects where pattern recognition matters (consider the link between CCTV and face recognition: a surveillance technology that is in its infancy). On the other hand, staff in the CIA, think that classification is concerned with marking and protecting information vital to national security. Roosevelt was responsible for the very first Executive Order, EO 8381, signed in March, 1940, which specified the framework for handling secret US information of military significance, and which, for example, gave the basis for handling the details of the Manhattan Project.

We are at the provisional end point, then, of a number of histories. The particular history, if indeed it is singular, that I am concerned with is that of the

encyclopaedia. Although I am not concerned with the encyclopaedia as such, but with its transcendental presuppositions, and would like to offer three instantiations of the priori thinking that has under girded the theory and practice of encyclopaedism.

- It may have been possible to believe in the premiss of the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900, that its 18 groups and 121 classes of items exhibited stood without need of qualification or justification.
- It remained the case in the late 1940s and 1950s that the US academy was the site of the project of a unified science which would incorporate the social sciences.
- In the 1960s the incorporation of the study of languages and communication under the general rubric of semiology was a serious intellectual aim.

These three rapidly traversed examples follow a transcendental logic which Perec describes in the following terms:

> So it was imagined that the entire world could be distributed according to a unique code, that one universal law would reign over the totality of phenomena: two hemispheres, five continents, masculine and feminine, animal and vegetable, singular plural, right left, four seasons, five senses, six vowels, seven days, twelve months, twenty-six letters. (Perec 1985: 155)

This dream of the universal, Perec tells us, does not, did not and never will work.

In what follows, I will pursue this dream of the universal in both of its modes. First we will follow the spirit of *theos* and *logos* as represented by the Platonic embrace of totality. Secondly we will address the mechanics of atomism in the case of Cartesian reduction. I will follow this shift from theology to ontology, from the post-synthetic to the post-analytic, with the destruction of these pretensions to absolute classificatory veracity. This destruction was contained, from the beginning, within sociology. Finally, I will return to Perec, ending with the semi-plagiaristic acronym – PROCLAP.

Platonic Classification

The opening problem of classification is inescapably connected with the totality of human knowledge of what exists. What are the criteria for genuine knowledge? How is the totality of this genuine knowledge mapped? The known history of such encyclopaedic concerns begins with the pre-Socratic philosophers. It is generally said about them that enquiry into the nature of the cosmos, what its essence might be, is where Thales and Anaximander began. Heraclitus, who made the famous observation that one cannot step into the same river twice, thought that flux was the key to cosmological understanding. This did not mean an evacuation of guiding principles. On the contrary, he thought of war and also of fire as elemental. The Heraclitean position is that any given state of affairs is but a temporary resolution of the conflict of opposing forces. In contrast, consider Parmenides. The core of his thinking was the recognition of a divine 'motionless heart of well-rounded truth' against which is set the opinions of mortals. The latter will be tested to destruction. The seeds of law, doctrine and dogma are encapsulated in Parmenides, while those of dialectic, debate and compromise emerge from Heraclitus. The work of Socrates and Plato feeds from both traditions, taking us from imagination and myth into epistemology, and the first glimmerings of a reflexive understanding of classification.

The major part in Plato's late dialogue *The Sophist* is taken by an unnamed stranger from Elea. He is introduced as a disciple of Parmenides and also of Zeno, who was a pupil of Parmenides. The dual influence becomes clear as the stranger deploys a combination of logic and unquestioned assertion concerning the detailed operations of the world in order to bring out the distinction between philosophy and sophistry. Robinson and Denniston summarise the core of the dialogue as follows:

> Sophistry entails falsehood, which entails 'not-being', which seems self-contradictory. 'Being' is no better; it raises difficulties alike for pluralists, monists, materialists, and immaterialists; it is neither rest nor motion, yet everything must either rest or move. The solution is the doctrine of 'communication'. Some things communicate with each other, so that we can sometimes truly say 'A is B'. (11)

Applying the doctrine of communication means investigating to find out the precise class and subsequent sub-classes to which the object of the enquiry belongs. In this dialogue between an accomplished stranger and the young Theaetetus, the aim is to define through classification what a sophist is. The essential identity of the sophist is established by determining the class to which it belongs. This is not a procedure that Theaetetus will know. It is, if not a new form of thinking entirely, at least an exercise at a new level of rigour and complexity. He will need some coaching. So they start with an apparently simple and familiar case. What is the definition of an angler? Are Anglers acquisitive or creative? Do they proceed by exchange or force? Is their method open or concealed? If they hunt live prey, is it land or water-based? Do they net, spear or hook them? Thus the stranger from Elea takes Theaetetus through the Athenian equivalent of a platform game, and, having traversed the various levels one by one, sums it up as follows:

> Within expertise as a whole one half was acquisitive; half of the acquisitive was taking possession; half of possession-taking was hunting; half of hunting was animal-hunting; half of animal-hunting was aquatic hunting; all of the lower portion of aquatic hunting was fishing; half of fishing was hunting by striking; and half of striking was hooking. And the part of hooking that involves a blow drawing a thing upward from underneath is called by a name that's derived from its similarity to the action itself, it's called draw-fishing or angling – which is what we're searching for. (Plato 241)

Proceeding now to the real task, the stranger soon defines the sophist as a hunter, whose weapon is flattery and whose prey is young wealthy men. But this is no end to the matter. Further consideration reveals the sophist to be capable of being classified in other ways. If seen as a practitioner of exchange rather than a hunter, he comes to be seen as a virtue merchant, trading in his own or in others' wisdoms. And yet another line can be drawn from the subdivision of the forms of acquisitive expertise, now classifying the sophist as a member of 'the money-making branch of expertise in debating, disputation, controversy, fighting, combat and acquisition' (Plato 246) The sophist is, the stranger observes, a complex beast.

The question for us, in regard to the matter of classification, appears to be whether it is the apparent many-sidedness of the sophist or the seeming singularity of the angler which is paradigmatic? In fact, what Plato does in this dialogue is to show that the pursuit of understanding through the search for what something *is* need not be about finding the essential identity of the thing. It can equally well be about discovering connections, that there is a link between the hunter and the sophist, but also between the merchant and the sophist, and so on. In this way, Plato transcends the Parmenidean injunction that the truth is not reached by tracking what something is not. Parmenides had written, '…you can neither know what is not (for it is impossible) nor tell of it' and 'Only one story of the way is still left: that a thing is.' (Coxon 1986: 52, 60; see also Heidegger 1992) Now, Plato moves beyond this search for the absolute core of the existent, and begins to pursue its understanding through its connectivities elsewhere. It is at this point that the very possibility of classification is born as the pursuit of defined associations. Classification is not about equivalence but about association, and Plato's rejection of the Parmenidean insistence on the one single story affirms – to Plato's own consternation – a fundamental link between associative classification and the narrative imagination.

There are dangers here. A movement away from Parmenidean essentialism might invite caprice and falsehood. How are we to tell which associations are truthful? Plato does not pose nor answer the question clearly, but he does recognise the importance of discernment and discrimination in the search for a true understanding of the classes into which things fall. The stranger says:

> …he who can divide rightly is able to see one form pervading a scattered multitude, and many different forms contained under one higher form…This is the knowledge of classes which determines where they can have communion with one another and where not. (Plato, *The Sophist*: 31)

Plato thought there to be a true order of classes for any given phenomenon but only had rhetorical method available to him for arriving there. Hence his recourse to general qualities of discernment, and his subsequent clarification that discernment and discrimination are operations of purification. Also, it is here easy to see why the differences between the true philosopher and the problematic sophist would be of great concern.

The philosopher is the one who 'can divide rightly' and determine where 'communion' is possible and where not. Defence against false classification would be enshrined in education, the teaching by rote of the true understandings and laws of the city. The defence against falsehood, at the time of the birth of classification, is a major concern of domestic politics, as we can see in *The Laws* (292), in which Plato writes: 'change, we shall find, except in something evil, is extremely dangerous.' This comment, made while discussing education, makes complete sense only if we understand that there was then no secure *method* for arriving at or testing classifications. Education was the means of hanging on to the ones which were established. The concept of research was not yet born. Education was social defence.

Cartesian Classification

The Eleatic stranger in *The Sophist* began the work of classification with the whole. The totality of human endeavour, abbreviated in the Greek context to the term which is translated as 'art' or 'expertise' was then divided into smaller constituent totalities, and these again into those that were further inferior. There is no natural stopping point for this process, except that determined by its object and purpose. There was no need to distinguish between different kinds of anglers in *The Sophist*, and hence the example could naturally stop where it did. The aim of the example was the placing of what was known in its proper place within the wider universe of known things. The process was not propelled by curiosity but by administration. It was filing rather than research. When we come to contrast Plato and Descartes, we find the latter to proceed differently in three basic respects.

In the first place, he had been in active pursuit of a method for confirming the validity of his apprehensions of the world. He had laboured to develop a thesis about the nature of the mind and its inherent ability to apprehend the world clearly. In *The First Meditation*, the extended reflection which leads to the phrase *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes' failure to render apodictic anything other than the certainty of his own existence, reinforced the need for methodical care. His hunting ground was empirical reality, but its verities were not secured by his philosophy. Unlike Plato who sought understanding on the basis of a faith in timeless form and its apprehension by philosophy, Cartesian certainty would, at least in the realm of the objective, be

achieved by following rules of procedure. In his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule 12 tells us that our 'intellect, imagination, sense perception, and memory' allow us 'to intuit simple propositions distinctly'; Rule 5 states: 'The whole method consists entirely in the ordering and arranging of the objects on which we must concentrate our mind's eye if we are to discover some truth'; and Rule 7 warns us to be sure not to leave anything out: 'in order to make our knowledge complete, every single thing relating to our undertaking must be surveyed in a continuous and wholly uninterrupted sweep of thought.' The Cartesian method, then, begins with the suspicion of established usage and understanding, insisting that such be checked by breaking down these views into their component parts in order to be able to stand on the firm ground of simple intuitions. As he put it in *The Discourse on Method*, he resolved to conduct his thoughts

> In an orderly way, beginning with the simplest objects and the easiest to know, in order to climb gradually , as by degrees, as far as the knowledge of the most complex… (Descartes 1968: 41)

The second difference is already implicit in the foregoing. Plato began with the complex and divided it up, deriving from it groups of less complexity. Descartes, in contrast, aspired to begin from basic elements. Rule 20 continued, '…we first reduce complicated and obscure propositions step by step to simpler ones, and then, starting with intuition of the simplest ones of all, try to ascend through the same steps to a knowledge of all the rest.' (20) There is a good example of Descartes' method at work in the last thing that he published, *The Passions of the Soul*. He takes issue with previous classifications of the passions, especially with that found in Plato's *Republic*, and finds that there are six primitive passions, all of which relate to the function of leading us 'to want the things which nature deems useful for us, and to persist in this volition.' (349) These six primitive passions are wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness. He goes on, in his analysis, to show that esteem, contempt, generosity, vanity, humility, veneration, scorn, hope, anxiety, confidence, despair, jealousy, irresolution, courage, fear, remorse, derision, envy, pity, tranquillity, repentance, gratitude, ingratitude, indignation, anger, pride, shame, impudence, disgust, regret, and cheerfulness are all modalities or mixtures of the six primitive passions. Whatever the merits of his analysis, the paradigm is clear: theory of passions,

classification of the elemental kinds, survey of the entire field in terms of element, allotrope and hybrid.

The third difference between the Platonic and Cartesian approaches to classification is now evident. Cartesian intuition of simple truths simultaneously allows and is reinforced by a fundamental understanding of pan-ontological processes. These processes are seen as unfailingly mechanical. The functional basis of the classification of the passions is meant to be (whether or not it is so is beyond our scope here) subordinate to a mechanical worldview. In his treatise on light, Descartes discusses the elements of fire, air and earth in terms of 'the size, shape and motion of their parts' (Descartes in Cottingham *et al* 89). He then goes on to say the following:

> If you find it strange that in explaining these elements I do not use the qualities heat, cold, moisture and dryness – as the philosophers do – I shall say to you that these qualities themselves seem to me to need explanation. Indeed unless I am mistaken, not only these four qualities but all others as well, including even the forms of inanimate bodies, can be explained without the need to suppose anything in their matter other than the motion, size, shape and arrangements of its parts.

In demonstration of this, as it were, Descartes' account of the six primitive passions is elaborated in terms of their bodily concomitants, and all are 'caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits'(333), which are, for him, 'the finest parts of the blood.' (331)

The Sociology of Classification

Although Descartes does move the underlying potentiality of classification from the administration of the given toward the orchestration of the possible, there remains much more to be done. In particular, it will be necessary to test the remaining links between classification and truth. Our understanding of this begins with Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.

Durkheim and Mauss introduced dirt and contamination into the perception of the classification process. They thought that classification is 'a process into which all

sorts of foreign elements enter.' (Durkheim and Mauss 1969: 8) Classification is not something which happens naturally. They wanted to know how classifications came about. They tried to look at the most fundamental classifications to see how they were constructed. They thought that fundamental meant primitive, and in *Primitive Classification*, they argued that the most primitive forms of classification are to be found in Australian tribes, and their general conclusion was that their classifications reflect their social structure.

> The individuals of the clan, the creatures of the totemic species, and those of related species, all these are nothing but diverse aspects of one and the same realities.(20)

They saw that the primitive classificatory function appeared slow to change. They were linking its rhythms to those of social change. In the aboriginal context that had been extraordinarily slow. They tried to test the notion that classification systems and social systems form a unity. They did this for Australia, North America, and finally subjected it to what they thought of as the most difficult test of all: 'the astronomical, astrological, geomantic and horoscopic divinatory system of the Chinese.' (67) If the premisses of their own analysis are accepted, that the structures of the simplest societies will reveal themselves clearly reflected in classificatory and religious systems, while those in later societies will be less likely to be clearly mirrored within such definite frames, then what they find in their researches is confirmatory. When looking at the Zuni of North America, they find a division of space into seven regions, and they find that reflected within the social system. As they put it, 'this division of the world is exactly the same as that of the clans within pueblo.' (44) When it comes to the exceedingly complex Chinese case they move from a simple position where the classification reflects and is the social arrangement to one where any single classification is less revelatory and is just a part of the social arrangement. So, in the Chinese case, following a brief analysis of the complexities of the twelve year cycle which moves from the year of the rat through tiger, dragon, dog and finally to pig, they comment, 'we clearly have to do with a multitude of interlaced classifications which, in spite of their contradictions, grasp reality closely enough to provide a fairly useful guide to action.' (73)

One problem with their research in the Australian, North American and Chinese cases is that their evidence base is secondary and always potentially

unreliable, if only because it was often collected under conditions of methodological compromise. However, this should not obscure the importance of the sociological insight that classificatory systems are both part of society and also potentially expressive of fundamental social dynamics. Durkheim and Mauss coded this conclusion in their statement (83-4) that systems of classification are inevitably hierarchical (a view which prefigures deconstruction, and predates it by more than half a century). But they did not really explore that insight. That was left to be developed with the advent of deconstruction in the 1970s. To see what did follow, we need to more forward to the work of Lévi-Strauss.

For Lévi-Strauss, the advent of society is already the advent of classifications. For "primitive" societies the origins of the classificatory systems are largely forgotten. But, in some way, the classified orderliness of social existence is reproduced from generation to generation, and this fact is by no means undermined or weakened by the citation of those societies undergoing radical transformations or by those in a state of war (*pace* Heraclitus). We have been taught this lesson again and again, by civil wars across the world. If classifications are reproduced, from generation to generation, how does this happen? Lévi-Strauss rejected Durkheim's Platonist conception of a collective conscience detached from the individual members of the society, and adopted Marcel Mauss's adaptation that the sociological structures the psychological through the process of upbringing. The deeply sociologically saturated upbringing which is characteristic of any process of socialisation shapes and constructs individual minds so that the "objective world" is understood from within a particular framework of classifications. Lévi-Strauss did not agree with the ethnocentric and developmentalist view that "primitive societies" employed false assumptions and inadequate systems of classifications which could be shown to be false and inadequate when compared to the systems of twentieth-century Europe. Although the latter systems might be more complex than the former, they did not necessarily relate along the same continuum since the essential characteristic of the ordered framework of assumptions, in either case, was not its adequacy to some mythical "real world" but, rather, its very order. At some level, the specific detail of a social structure is less important than its being as classificatory structure, as patterned, as reproducible. As Lévi-Strauss put it, "Any classification is superior to chaos, and even a classification at the level of sensible properties is a step towards rational ordering" (1962 (1966: 15)). What Lévi-Strauss calls the "Neolithic paradox" illustrates the point:

> It was in Neolithic times that man's mastery of the great arts of civilisation - of pottery, weaving, agriculture, and the domestication of animals - became firmly established. No one today would any longer think of attributing these enormous advances to the fortuitous accumulation of a series of chance discoveries or believe them to have been revealed by the passive perception of certain natural phenomena…what would happen if copper ore had accidentally found its way into a furnace [?] complex and varied experiments have shown that nothing happens at all. The simplest method of obtaining metallic copper which could be discovered consists in subjecting finely ground malachite to intense heat in a pottery dish crowned with an inverted clay pot…(13-14)

We do not know what set of classifications of the world allowed for the discovery of copper, but we do know - Lévi-Strauss implies - that there had to be one; and, in some way, that classification system would have been carried in people's minds in much the same way that grammatical classifications are (mostly) unwittingly carried in the minds of language users. The sociological realisation that the relation between classification and reality is not that of attempted duplication with changes explained by increasing verisimilitude constitutes a definitive break with both Platonism and Cartesianism. It is, interestingly, now reflected in the mathematical understanding of classification theory, where one mathematician discovering four clusters in a data set defines their reality not in terms of their underlying referents, but in terms of the methodological conventions employed within the mathematical community.

Doing Classification

Plato saw the subversive potential in re-classification (Murdoch 1977). Even Descartes could apprehend the possibility of order 'among those objects which do not precede each other naturally.' Lévi-Strauss thought classification to be rather like a form of magic, in the sense that it is not how classification reflects the world which matters, but rather its effect on the world deriving from its internal arrangement. There is an extant model for thinking this through. It is enshrined in the group called

OuLiPo, an abbreviation for the phrase *Ouvroir pour littérature potentielle*: workshop for potential literature.

OuLiPo was formed in 1960, following a colloquium on the French language, at Cérisy-la-Salle. Its leader and inspiration was Raymond Queneau (incidentally the editor of the Pléïade encyclopaedia), and his interest was in the intersections between poetry and mathematics, and also in the study of language as it is spoken on the street. While OuLiPo was modelled on the French mathematical group *Bourbaki* which was comprised of a number of anonymous mathematicians, it was not a secret society although it did have very strict rules. For example, resignation was impossible. Even death did not mean withdrawal, only permitted absence from meetings. In March 1967, Georges Perec was invited to join the group – only its second new member since its inception seven years earlier. When Perec gave an unheralded talk at the University of Warwick a couple of months later, he described his 1965 publication, *Les Choses*, in terms of a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces included work by Barthes and Flaubert. The conception that Perec had was that he should write the text which completed the picture which would then be made by the pieces he started with and the one he had fashioned. His interest was in putting things together. Perec was, however, also located within that lineage which seeks to emancipate classification from its functions for social utility, freeing it for the creation of serendipitous wonderment. He stopped short, however, of declaring that re-classification would somehow illustrate the road to social revolution. Whether this was a rejection of sociology or of political will, is a judgement we shall have to come to.

Michel Foucault thought incomprehensible the world which Borges summoned up in his 'The analytical language of John Wilkins' where the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* divides the creatures of the world into:

- those that belong to the Emperor,
- embalmed ones,
- those that are trained,
- suckling pigs,
- mermaids,
- fabulous ones,
- stray dogs,
- those included in the present classification,
- those that tremble as if they were mad,
- innumerable ones,
- those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush,
- others,

- those that have just broken a flower vase,
- those that from a long way off look like flies.

However, fantasies of alternative orderings of things are clear to see within the narrative tradition from Homer forward. What they may always fail to do is escape the imprint of their time. Although it may not always be easy to find and read its signs. There was, then, a touch of willed naïveté about Foucault's citation of Borges. He knew such a list could be read, even if the reading was beyond the reader at a particular juncture. Perec was uneasy with this sociological truth. His uneasiness has three sources. He had an understanding of everyday life in emergent consumer society as programmed and somewhat lifeless (the final sentence of his 1965 novel, *Les Choses*, a quasi-ethnographic treatment of the everyday life of a young Parisian couple, reads, 'Mais le repas qu'on leur servira sera franchement insipide.'). Second he had a poet's desire to imagine other places, and thirdly he saw that even imposed classification systems were capable of operative perversion and innumerable forms of parody. Perec was well aware that there is a difference between classification and its subsequent use, and he provided an extended example of this difference when he tried to record everything he'd eaten and drunk over 12 months, placing his notes in his *Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four* (he eat beef, chicken, pork, paté, cheese, tart and cake, rabbit, fish and offal, drank 141 specified bottles of wine and admitted a failure to record how many other casual verres de rouge he had drunk; he seemed to take pastis or a glass of cognac or eau de vie every other day, but hardly a bottle of beer a month, and he may have been a 'pudding man', listing pies, tarts, mousses, charlottes, babas, gateaux, ice creams, and sorbets [Jack: 2004]) . The interest in life, thought and classification is a constant in his work, appearing not only in his text, *Penser/classer* to which we now turn.

Perec begins with the apparent paradox that thinking is not in control of what is thought. He begins by rehearsing some fairly obvious moves: thought is fleeting, incomplete, fragmentary. Should we not preserve its granulation rather than try to put it in some sort of order? If that is avoiding the issue, we can take this line of thinking into apparent depth by positing a line from thinking to the unthinkable, and from classifying to the unclassifiable. If it is here already a question of starting again, then perhaps we should begin in a more practical way – with a few questions. When I think have I already been engaged in classification, or is it vice-versa? Do I think

differently when I am explicitly trying to classify? How do I classify the verbs of classification? Perec could have gone back to Plato or Descartes for a lesson or two, but instead he leaves his list – which there seems little point in translating, unless to remind ourselves that there are wider classification resources at our disposal - suspended (and is this act of suspension not already part of an operation of classification):

> *Cataloguer, classer, classifier, découper, énumérer, grouper, hiérarchiser, lister, numéroter, ordonnancer, ordonner, ranger, regrouper, répartir…subdiviser, distribuer, discriminer, caractériser, marquer, definer, dinstinguer, opposer*, etc. (1989: 154-5)

He knows that the Inuit have a number of words for ice, that the English have more words for a residential street than the French, that both have more than the Inuit, and that if you walk into a confectioners and ask for a packet of sweets, then you will be asked which kind you want. He does not, however, draw the explicit conclusion that context is determinant in some way, although he might have done, since his implicit conclusion regarding the 18 groups and 121 classes which ordered the contents of *la grande Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1900 is that they derived from a necessary *dirigisme*. On the contextual conditioning of Shônagon's nine kinds of disagreeable things (the ninth kind – things disagreeable to see – is illustrated by the dirty interior curtains of a high dignitary's ceremonial motor car), Perec says nothing, but does reflect that such a listing is not a classification (he might have gone on to wonder what it would have meant for these details to have been signalled in an index, and did retain an interest in such paraphernalia that were part of the text, but outside it in some way [Magné 2004]). By extension, the same is true of the sorrows of Zachary McCaltex, whom, Perec tells us, was, amongst other things, half-devoured by a wild cat. And, by further extension, he notes that neither a collection like Robert Kaufman's 7495 different kinds of cigarettes nor the kind of enumeration one finds in *The Guinness Book of Records,* exemplified by Perec with Walter Cavanagh's 1003 valid credit cards, are classifications. His musings suggest family resemblances, and one other thing – perhaps some of the classifications we take for granted and use are at root mere collections whose contents could be otherwise. This might be true of dictionaries of biography, but also of the rules of grammar (not Perec's example, which is of an algorithm for creating aphorisms, created by Marcel Benabou)? This is

indeed Perec's provisional conclusion, 'that the response to the question of classification is both completely obvious and utterly obscure, that it has to do with trial and error, suspicion, chance and coincidence.' (173)

What conclusion can be drawn if the classificatory process is so aleatory? Perec sought the limits of self-determination by hypothesizing a complex and rewarding life that would not engage in the arbitrary game of re-classification. It is possible to think that this was a rejection of the illusions of both sociology and politics. This rejection is to be found in Perec's masterpiece, *La vie mode d'emploi*, a 700 page written pictorialisation of the inhabitants – both animate and inanimate – of the ten-level house at 11, rue Simon-Crubellier. The fulcrum is Bartlebooth's grand project, the devotion of his life to a discrete task, sufficiently arduous to be compelling, but both capable of completion and sufficiently self-contained and self-cancelling in its completion to have no pretence at contributing to any sense or hope of social significance. In 1925, Bartlebooth will take one lesson a day for ten years in the practice of watercolour painting. Between 1935 and 1955, he will travel to five hundred seaports across the world producing one watercolour of each port. After each is done he will send them, one by one, to a master craftsman, Gaspard Winckler. Winckler will turn each watercolour into a wooden jigsaw puzzle of 750 pieces. From 1955 to 1975, Bartlebooth will complete the puzzles at the same rate as they were painted. As each puzzle is completed, 'the seascape would be 'retexturised' so that it could be removed from its backing, returned to the place where it had been painted – twenty years before – and dipped in a detergent solution whence would emerge a clean and unmarked sheet…' (119) This work of vanishing labour is without hope or energy for an outside – which in all its detail is re-presented in the form of descriptions of the lives of those who live in the house, extending in giddying fashion into the decorative, physical and architectural themes running through every room/story of the house/novel, so that the work is more akin to a super-complex narrative *Sudoku* than perhaps anything else(see Perec 1979, Levy 2004 and Motte and Poucel 2004 *passim*).

Perec, explaining his own construction methods, Levy, Magné and others point out that 42 categories are used in each chapter, one of which being highlighted in some way, with the other 41 being subject to variations, ten in all, from room to room, with every chapter including two quotes drawn from two lists of authors and a single allusion to one of a list of ten works. Perec and Bartlebooth appear to be

strategically opposite, with the former laying out his methods for all to see, and ruminating on what epistemological structures could underlie his work; while Batlebooth's plan is to be consumed in his systematic life but leave no trace of it. In both cases there does seem to be willed submission to an arduous regime of production. Bartlebooth's all-consuming, logistically exhausting, and ultimately traceless exercise cannot be completed, since otherwise we would not now be considering it as a part of the history of classification. What Perec's work brings us to is the difference between making and using classifications, and thus perhaps the two basic approaches to the history of classification, which is – uncomfortably – already to make and operate a classification system.

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