

'Think/Classify'*

D. Summary

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A. Methods

At the different stages of preparation for this essay – notes scribbled on notebooks or loose sheets of paper, quotations copied out, ‘ideas’, see, cf., etc. – I naturally accumulated small piles: lower-case b, CAPITAL I, thirdly, part two. Then, when the time came to bring these elements together (and they certainly needed to be brought together if this ‘article’ was finally one day to cease from being a vague project regularly put off until a less fraught tomorrow), it rapidly became clear that I would never manage to organize them into a discourse.

It was rather as if the images and ideas that had come to me – however shiny and promising they may at first have seemed, one by one, or even when opposed in pairs – had distributed themselves from the outset across the imaginary space of my as yet unblackened sheets of paper like the noughts (or the crosses) that a not very skilful player of noughts and crosses spreads

*First published in *Le Genre humain* in 1982.

over his grid without ever managing to have three together in a straight line.

This discursive deficiency is not due simply to my laziness (or my feebleness at noughts and crosses); it’s connected rather with the very thing I have tried to define, if not to take hold of, in the topic I have been set here. As if the interrogation set in train by this ‘THINK/CLASSIFY’ had called the thinkable and the classifiable into question in a fashion that my ‘thinking’ could only reflect once it was broken up into little pieces and dispersed, so reverting endlessly to the very fragmentation it claimed to be trying to set in order.

What came to the surface was of the nature of the fuzzy, the uncertain, the fugitive and the unfinished, and in the end I chose deliberately to preserve the hesitant and perplexed character of these shapeless scraps, and to abandon the pretence of organizing them into something that would by rights have had the appearance (and seductiveness) of an article, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Perhaps this is to answer the question put to me, before it was put. Perhaps it is to avoid putting it so as not to have to answer it. Perhaps it is to use, and abuse, that old rhetorical figure known as the *excuse* whereby, instead of confronting the problem needing to be resolved, one is content to reply to questions by asking other questions, taking refuge each time behind a more or less feigned incompetence. Perhaps also it is to designate the question as in fact having no answer, that is, to refer thinking back to the unthought on which it rests, and the classified to the unclassifiable (the unnameable, the unsayable) which it is so eager to disguise.

N. Questions

Think/classify

What does the fraction line signify?

What am I being asked precisely? Whether I think before I classify? Whether I classify before I think? How I classify what I think? How I think when I seek to classify?

S. Vocabulary exercises

How could one classify the following verbs: arrange, catalogue, classify, cut up, divide, enumerate, gather, grade, group, list, number, order, organize, sort? They are arranged here in alphabetical order.

These verbs can't all be synonymous: why would we need fourteen words to describe just one action? They are different, therefore. But how to differentiate between them all? Some stand in opposition to one another even though they refer to an identical preoccupation: *cut up*, for example, evokes the notion of a whole needing to be divided into distinct elements, while *gather* evokes the notion of distinct elements needing to be brought together into a whole.

Others suggest new verbs (for example: subdivide, distribute, discriminate, characterize, mark, define, distinguish, oppose, etc.), taking us back to that original burbling in which we can with difficulty make out what might be called the readable (what our mental activity is able to read, apprehend, understand).

U. The world as puzzle

'Plants are divided into trees, flowers and vegetables.'

Stephen Leacock

So very tempting to want to distribute the entire world in terms of a single code. A universal law would then regulate phenomena as a whole: 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.

Unfortunately, this doesn't work, has never even begun to work, will never work. Which won't stop us continuing for a long time to come to categorize this animal or that according to whether it has an odd number of toes or hollow horns.

R. Utopias

All utopias are depressing because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for the 'miscellaneous'. Everything has been set in order and order reigns. Behind every utopia there is always some great taxonomic design: a place for each thing and each thing in its place.

E. Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

Conseil knew how to classify (*classer*) fish.

Ned Land knew how to hunt (*chasser*) fish.

Conseil draws up annotated lists of the fish that Ned Land draws up out of the sea.*

L. Reason and thought

What in fact is the relationship between reason and thought (aside from the fact that *Raison* and *Pensée* were the titles of two philosophical journals in France)? The dictionaries aren't much help in supplying an answer. In the *Petit Robert*, for example, a thought = whatever affects the consciousness, while reason = the thinking faculty. We would find a relationship or a difference between the two terms more easily, I fancy, by studying the adjectives they may be graced by: a thought can be kind, sudden, trite or delightful; reason can be pure, sufficient, good, or sovereign.

I. Eskimos

Eskimos, I am assured, have no generic name for denoting ice. They have several words (I've forgotten the exact number, but I

*Conseil and Ned Land are characters in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.

believe it's a lot, something like a dozen) which denote specifically the various aspects that water takes between its wholly liquid state and the various manifestations of its more or less intense frozenness.

It is hard, obviously, to find an equivalent example in French. It may be that Eskimos have only one word to denote the space that separates their igloos, whereas we, in our towns, have at least seven (*rue, avenue, boulevard, place, cours, impasse, venelle*), and the English at least twenty (street, avenue, crescent, place, road, row, lane, mews, gardens, terrace, yard, square, circus, grove, court, green, houses, gate, ground, way, drive, walk); but we do all the same have a noun (*artère*, for example) that subsumes all of these. Similarly, if we talk to a pastry-cook about cooking sugar, his answer will be that he can't understand us unless we specify what degree of cooking we want (thread, ball, crack, etc.), but then for him the notion of 'cooking sugar' is already firmly established.

G. The Universal Exposition

The objects displayed at the great Exposition of 1900 were divided into eighteen Groups and 121 Classes. 'The products must be offered to visitors in a logical sequence,' wrote M. Picard, the Chief Commissioner of the Exposition, 'and their classification must answer to a simple, clear and precise conception bearing its own philosophy and justification within it, so that the overall idea may be easily grasped.'

Read the programme drawn up by M. Picard and it appears that this overall idea was inadequate. A trite metaphor justifies the leading place given to Education and Teaching: 'It is by this that man *enters* on to life.' Works of Art come next because their 'place of honour' must be preserved. 'Reasons of this same kind' mean that the 'General Instruments and Procedures of Literature and the Fine Arts' occupy third place. In the 16th Class of which, and I wonder why, one finds Medicine and Surgery (straitjackets, invalid beds, crutches and wooden legs, army medical kits, Red Cross emergency equipment, lifesaving devices for the drowning

and asphyxiated, rubber devices from the firm of Bognier & Burnet, etc.).

Between the 4th and 14th Groups, the categories follow one another without revealing any obvious idea of system. One can still see fairly easily how Groups 4, 5 and 6 are arranged (Machinery; Electricity; Civil Engineering and Means of Transport), and Groups 7, 8 and 9 (Agriculture; Horticulture and Arboriculture; Forests, Hunting and Fishing), but then we really do go off in all directions: Group 10, Foodstuffs; Group 11, Mining and Metallurgy; Group 12, Furniture and Interior Design for Public Buildings and Private Dwellings; Group 13, Clothing, Spun and Woven Fabrics; Group 14, Chemical Industry.

Group 15 is rightly given over to whatever hasn't found a place among the other fourteen, i.e. to 'Miscellaneous Industries' (paper-making; cutlery; goldsmithery; gems and jewellery-making; clock-making; bronze, cast iron, ornamental ironwork, chased metals; brushes, leatherwork, fancy goods and basketry; leather and guttapercha; knickknackery).

Group 16 (Social Economy, with the addition of Hygiene and Public Assistance) is there because it (Social Economy) 'must follow on *naturally* [my italics] from the various branches of artistic, agricultural and industrial production as being at once their resultant and their philosophy.'

Group 17 is devoted to 'Colonization'. This is a new grouping (relative to the Exposition of 1889) whose 'creation has been amply justified by the need for colonial expansion felt by all civilized peoples'.

The last place, finally, is occupied quite simply by the Army and Navy.

The division of products within these Groups and their Classes contains innumerable surprises which it isn't possible to go into in detail here.

T. The alphabet

I have several times asked myself what logic was applied in the distribution of the six vowels and twenty consonants of our alphabet. Why start with A, then B, then C, etc.? The fact that there is obviously no answer to this question is initially reassuring. The order of the alphabet is arbitrary, inexpressive and therefore neutral. Objectively speaking, A is no better than B, the ABC is not a sign of excellence but only of a beginning (the ABC of one's métier).

But the mere fact that there is an order no doubt means that, sooner or later and more or less, each element in the series becomes the insidious bearer of a qualitative coefficient. Thus a B-movie will be thought of as 'less good' than another film which, as it happens, no one has yet thought of calling an 'A-movie'. Just as a cigarette manufacturer who has the words 'Class A' stamped on his packets is giving us to understand that his cigarettes are superior to others.

The qualitative alphabetical code is not very well stocked. In fact, it has hardly more than three elements: A = excellent; B = less good; Z = hopeless (a Z-movie). But this doesn't stop it being a code and superimposing a whole hierarchical system on a sequence that is by definition inert.

For reasons that are somewhat different but still germane to my purpose, it may be noted that numerous companies go out of their way, in their corporate titles, to end up with acronyms of the 'AAA', 'ABC', 'AAAC', etc. kind so as to figure among the first entries in professional directories and phone books. Conversely, a schoolboy does well to have a name whose initial letter comes in the middle of the alphabet, because he will then stand a better chance of not being asked a question.

C. Classifications

Taxonomy can make your head spin. It does mine whenever my eyes light on an index of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC). By what succession of miracles has agreement been reached, practically throughout the world, that 668.184.2.099 shall denote the finishing of toilet soap, and 629.1.018-465 horns on refuse vehicles; whereas 621.3.027.23, 621.436:382, 616.24-002.5-084, 796.54, and 913.15 denote respectively: tensions not exceeding 50 volts, the export trade in Diesel motors, the prophylaxy of tuberculosis, camping, and the ancient geography of China and Japan!

O. Hierarchies

We have undergarments, garments and overgarments, but without thinking of them as forming a hierarchy. But if we have managers and undermanagers, underlings and subordinates, we practically never have overmanagers or supermanagers. The one example I have found is 'superintendent', which is an ancient title. More significantly still, in the prefectorial body in France we have sub-prefects, and above the sub-prefects prefects, and above the prefects, not over-prefects or superprefects, but IGAMEs (= Inspecteur Général de l'Administration en Mission Extraordinaire), whose barbaric acronym has apparently been chosen in order to indicate that here we are dealing with big shots.

At times the underling persists even after the ling has changed his name. In the corps of librarians, for example, there aren't exactly any librarians any more; they are called curators and are classified by classes or under headings (curators second class, first class, special curators, head curators). Conversely, on the floors below, they continue to employ under-librarians.

P. How I classify

My problem with classifications is that they don't last; hardly have I finished putting things into an order before that order is obsolete. Like everyone else, I presume, I am sometimes seized by a mania for arranging things. The sheer number of the things needing to be arranged and the near-impossibility of distributing them according to any truly satisfactory criteria mean that I never finally manage it, that the arrangements I end up with are temporary and vague, and hardly any more effective than the original anarchy.

The outcome of all this leads to truly strange categories. A folder full of miscellaneous papers, for example, on which is written 'To be classified'; or a drawer labelled 'Urgent 1' with nothing in it (in the drawer 'Urgent 2' there are a few old photographs, in 'Urgent 3' some new exercise-books). In short, I muddle along.

F. Borges and the Chinese

'(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) domesticated, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) dogs running free, (h) included in the present classification, (i) which gesticulate like madmen, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, (l) etcetera, (m) which have just broken the pitcher, (n) which look from a distance like flies.'

Michel Foucault has hugely popularized this 'classification' of animals which Borges in *Other Inquisitions* attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopedia that one Doctor Franz Kuhn may have held in his hands. The abundance of intermediaries and Borges's well-known love of an ambiguous erudition permit one to wonder whether this rather too perfectly astonishing miscellaneity is not first and foremost an effect of art. An almost equally mind-boggling enumeration might be extracted simply enough from government documents that could hardly be more official :

- (a) animals on which bets are laid, (b) animals the hunting of which is banned between 1 April and 15 September, (c) stranded whales, (d) animals whose entry within the national frontiers is subject to quarantine, (e) animals held in joint ownership, (f) stuffed animals, (g) etcetera (this etc. is not at all surprising in itself; it's only where it comes in the list that makes it seem odd), (h) animals liable to transmit leprosy, (i) guide-dogs for the blind, (j) animals in receipt of significant legacies, (k) animals able to be transported in the cabin, (l) stray dogs without collars, (m) donkeys, (n) mares assumed to be with foal.

H. Sei Shonagon

Sei Shonagon does not classify; she enumerates and then starts again. A particular topic prompts a list, of simple statements or anecdotes. Later on, an almost identical topic will produce another list, and so on. In this way we end up with series that can be regrouped. 'Things' that move one, for example (things that cause the heart to beat faster, things sometimes heard with a greater than usual emotion, things that move one deeply). Or else, in the series of disagreeable 'things':

- upsetting things
- hateful things
- frustrating things
- troublesome things
- painful things
- things that fill one with anxiety
- things that seem distressing
- disagreeable things
- things disagreeable to the eye

A dog that barks during the day, a delivery room in which the baby is dead, a brazier without any fire, a driver who hates his ox, these are some of the upsetting things. Among the hateful things are to be found: a baby that cries at the very moment when you would like to listen to something, crows that flock together and caw when their flight paths cross, and dogs that go on and on

howling, in unison, on a rising note. Among the things that seem distressing: a baby's wetnurse who cries during the night. Among the things disagreeable to the eye: the carriage of a high dignitary whose interior curtains appear dirty.

V. The ineffable joys of enumeration

In every enumeration there are two contradictory temptations. The first is to list *everything*, the second is to forget something. The first would like to close off the question once and for all, the second to leave it open. Thus, between the exhaustive and the incomplete, enumeration seems to me to be, before all thought (and before all classification), the very proof of that need to name and to bring together without which the world ('life') would lack any points of reference for us. There are things that are different yet also have a certain similarity; they can be brought together in series within which it will be possible to distinguish them.

There is something at once uplifting and terrifying about the idea that nothing in the world is so unique that it can't be entered on a list. Everything can be listed: the editions of Tasso, the islands on the Atlantic Coast, the ingredients required to make a pear tart, the relics of the major saints, masculine substantives with a feminine plural (*amours, délices, orgues*), Wimbledon finalists, or alternatively, here restricted arbitrarily to ten, the sorrows of Mr Zachary McCalte^x:

Made to feel giddy by the scent of 6,000 dozen roses
 Gashes his foot on an old tin
 Half eaten by a ferocious cat
 Post-alcoholic para-amnesia
 Uncontrollable sleepiness
 All but knocked down by a lorry
 Sicks up his meal

*A character in *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, a novel by Perec's American friend and collaborator, Harry Mathews, which Perec translated into French in 1980.

Five-month sty on his eye
 Insomnia
 Alopecia

M. The Book of Records

The preceding list is not ordered, either alphabetically, or chronologically, or logically. As bad luck would have it, most lists these days are lists of winners: only those who come first exist. For a long time now books, discs, films and television programmes have been seen purely in terms of their success at the box-office (or in the charts). Not long ago, the magazine *Lire* even 'classified thought' by holding a referendum to decide which contemporary intellectuals wielded the greatest influence.

But if we are going to list records, better to go and find them in somewhat more eccentric fields (in relation to the subject that concerns us here): M. David Maund possesses 6,506 miniature bottles; M. Robert Kaufman 7,495 sorts of cigarette; M. Ronald Rose popped a champagne cork a distance of 31 metres; M. Isao Tsychiya shaved 233 people in one hour; and M. Walter Cavanagh possesses 1,003 valid credit cards.

X. Lowness and inferiority

By virtue of what complex have the departments of the Seine and the Charente insisted on becoming '*maritime*' so as not to be '*inférieure*' any longer? In the same way, the '*basses*' or 'low' Pyrénées have become '*atlantiques*', the '*basses*' Alpes have become '*de Haute-Provence*', and the Loire '*inférieure*' has become '*atlantique*'. Conversely, and for a reason that escapes me, the '*bas*' Rhin has still not taken offence at the proximity of the '*haut*' or 'high' Rhin.

It will be observed, similarly, that the Marne, Savoie and Vienne have never felt humiliated by the existence of the Haute-Marne, the Haute-Savoie and the Haute-Vienne, which ought to tell

us something about the role of the marked and unmarked in classifications and hierarchies.

Q. The dictionary

I possess one of the world's most peculiar dictionaries. It is entitled *Manuel biographique ou Dictionnaire historique abrégé des grands hommes depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours* ('Biographical Handbook or Concise Historical Dictionary of Great Men from the Most Distant Times up until Our Own Day'). It dates from 1825.

The dictionary is in two parts, totalling 588 pages. The first 288 pages are devoted to the first five letters of the alphabet; the second part, of 300 pages, to the remaining 21 letters. The first five letters are each entitled on average to 58 pages, the last 21 to only 14. I am well aware that letter frequency is far from being uniform (in the *Larousse du XXe siècle*, A, B, C and D alone take up two volumes out of the six), but the distribution here is really too unbalanced. If you compare it, for example, with that in Lalanne's *Biographie Universelle* (Paris, 1844), you will find that the letter C takes up proportionately three times as much space, and A and E twice as much, whereas M, R, S, T and V are entitled to roughly two times less space.

It would be interesting to look more closely at what influence this inequity has had on the entries: have they been shortened, and if so how? Have they been suppressed, and if so which ones and why? By way of an example, Anthemius, a sixth-century architect to whom we owe (in part) Santa-Sophia in Istanbul, is entitled to an entry of 31 lines, whereas Vitruvius gets only six; Anne de Boulen or Boleyn also gets 31 lines, but Henry the Eighth a mere 19.

*B. Jean Tardieu**

In the sixties they invented a device that enabled the focal length of a film camera lens to be varied continuously, so simulating (rather crudely in the event) an effect of movement without the camera actually having to be moved. The device is known as a 'zoom' lens and the corresponding verb in French is *zoomer*. Although this hasn't as yet been admitted to the dictionaries, it very soon imposed itself on the profession.

This isn't always the case. In most motor vehicles, for example, there are three pedals, each of which has its specific verb: *accélérer*, *débrayer*, *freiner* (to accelerate, to declutch, to brake). But there is no verb, to my knowledge, corresponding to the gear lever. We have to say *changer de vitesse* ('change gear'), *passer en troisième* ('get into third'), etc. Similarly, there is a verb in French for shoelaces (*lacer*) and for buttons (*boutonner*), but no verb for zip fasteners, whereas the Americans have to *zip up*.

The Americans also have a verb that means 'to live in the suburbs and work in the town': *to commute*. But they don't, any more than we do, have one which would mean: 'drink a glass of white wine with a friend from Burgundy, at the Café des Deux-Magots, around six o'clock on a rainy day, while talking about the non-meaningfulness of the world, knowing that you have just met your old chemistry teacher and that next to you a young woman is saying to her neighbour: "You know, I showed her some in every colour!"'.

(from Jean Tardieu: *Un Mot pour un autre*, 1951)

J. How I think

How I think when I'm thinking? How I think when I'm not thinking? At this very moment, how I think when I'm thinking

*A French poet and radio dramatist, born in 1903, whose black humour and obsession with language were much appreciated by Père.

about how I think when I'm thinking? The words '*penser/classer*', for example, make me think of '*passer/clamer*', or alternatively '*clapet sensé*', or even '*quand c'est placé*'.* Is this called 'thinking'?

I rarely get thoughts about the infinitely small or about Cleopatra's nose, about the holes in gruyère or about the Nietzschean sources of Maurice Leblanc and Joe Shuster.† It is much more of the order of a scribbling down, of a jogging of the memory or a truism.

Yet how, all the same, when 'thinking' (reflecting on?) about this essay, did I come to 'think' about the game of noughts and crosses, Leacock, Jules Verne, Eskimos, the 1900 Exposition, the names streets have in London, IGAMES, Sei Shonagon, Anthemius and Vitruvius? The answer to these questions is sometimes obvious and sometimes wholly obscure. I would have to speak of feeling my way, of flair, of inklings, of chance, of encounters that are fortuitous or prompted or fortuitously prompted: of meandering in the midst of words. I'm not thinking but I am searching for my words. In the heap there must surely be one that will come to clarify this drifting about, this hesitation, this agitation which, later, is going to 'mean something'.

It is a matter also, and above all, of montage, of distortion, of contortion, of detours, of a mirror, indeed of a formula, as the paragraph that follows will demonstrate.

K. Some aphorisms

Marcel Benabou of the OuLiPo has thought up a machine for manufacturing aphorisms. It consists of two parts, a grammar and a vocabulary.

The grammar lists a certain number of formulas commonly

*These are phrases sounding rather like *penser/classer* in French. *Clamer* is a slang verb for 'to kick the bucket'; *clapet* is a word meaning 'a valve', used familiarly in such phrases as '*ferme ton clapet!*', meaning 'shut your gob!'; *quand c'est placé* would simply mean 'when it's placed'.

†Maurice Leblanc was a writer of crime novels; Joe Shuster was one of the originators of the Superman character in the United States.

used in a majority of aphorisms. For example: A is the shortest route from B to C. A is the continuation of B by other means. A little A carries us away from B, a lot brings us closer. Little As make big Bs. A wouldn't be A if it wasn't B. Happiness is in A not B. A is a malady for which B is the cure. Etc.

The vocabulary lists pairs of words (or trios, or quartets) which may be false synonyms (sentiment/sensation, knowledge/science), antonyms (life/death, form/content, remember/forget), words that are phonetically close (belief/relief, love/leave), words grouped together by usage (crime/punishment, hammer/sickle, science/life). Etc.

The injection of the vocabulary into the grammar produces *ad lib* a near-infinite number of aphorisms, each one of them bearing more meaning than the last. Whence a computer program, devised by Paul Braffort, which can turn out on demand a good dozen within a few seconds:

Remembering is a malady for which forgetting is the cure
Remembering wouldn't be remembering if it weren't forgetting
What comes by remembering goes by forgetting
Small forgettings make big rememberings

Remembering adds to our pains, forgetting to our pleasures
Remembering delivers us from forgetting, but who will deliver us from remembering?

Happiness is in forgetting, not in remembering
Happiness is in remembering, not in forgetting
A little forgetting carries us away from remembering, a lot brings us closer

Forgetting unites men, remembering divides them
Remembering deceives us more often than forgetting
Etc.

Where is the *thinking* here? In the formula? In the vocabulary?
In the operation that marries them?

W. In a network of intersecting lines'

The alphabet used to 'number' the various paragraphs of this text follows the order in which the letters of the alphabet appear in the French translation of the seventh story in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*...

The title of this story, '*Dans un réseau de lignes entrecroisées*', contains this alphabet up to its thirteenth letter, O. The first line of the text enables us to go up to the eighteenth letter, M, the second gives us X, the third Q, the fourth nothing, the fifth B and J. The last four letters, K, W, Y and Z, are to be found, respectively, in lines 12, 26, 32 and 41 of the story.

From which it may easily be deduced that this story (at least in its French translation) is not lipogrammatic. It will be found similarly that three letters of the alphabet thus formed are in the same place as in the so-called normal alphabet: I, Y and Z.

Y. Miscellaneous

Interjections as classified by a (very second-rate) crossword dictionary (extracts):

Of admiration: *eh*

Of anger: *bigre*

Of scorn: *beuh*

Used by a carter in order to go ahead: *hue*

Expressing the sound of a falling body: *patatras*

Expressing the sound of a blow: *boum*

Expressing the sound of a thing: *crac, cric*

Expressing the sound of a fall: *pouf*

Expressing the cry of bacchantes: *evohé*

To urge on a pack of hounds: *taiaut*

Expressing a disappointed hope: *berrique*

Expressing an oath: *mordienne*

Expressing a Spanish oath: *caramba*

Expressing King Henri IV's favourite oath:

ventre-saint-gris

Expressing an oath expressing approval: *parbleu*

Used for getting rid of someone: *oust, ouste*