

The Chiasmus: Why is the chiasmus the last great form of truth-the only one we have left?

La Vie mode d'emploi: Percival Bartelbooth, the hero of Perec's great novel, plans to use up his life, and his fortune, without leaving a trace. Despite lacking any talent, he apprentices himself for ten years to a watercolorist. He then travels the world for twenty years. At each of five hundred ports Bartelbooth paints a watercolor and sends it back to Paris, where it is converted into a puzzle. Bartelbooth returns to Paris, solving the puzzles one-by-one and then shipping each to the location where it had been painted: there, after twenty years, they are dissolved.

The Chiasmus: The more stringent and mechanical the program, the more human does its author, or subject, become: this is Bartelbooth's truth. As with the dance, so-always-with the dancer: Perec, a most poignant and ethical writer, is famous for only working with the most rigid, stratospheric constraints. La Disparition was written without the letter E. Each chapter in La Vie mode d'emploi simply describes a room in a Parisian apartment block; the reader moves from room-to-room as a knight on a chessboard. Only by way of these most rigorous, elegant systems can Perec tell of Bartelbooth's rigorous and elegant puzzle, or game, or life; only by disappearing as a writer can he write the truth of our inevitable disappearance.

La Vie mode d'emploi: "Does he have hands? Does he have a face? Then it wasn't us."

The Chiasmus: Not coincidentally, all this takes place at or by the sea.

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