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Organization 1997 4: 345

DOI: 10.1177/135050849743003

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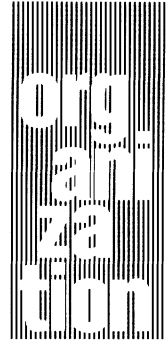
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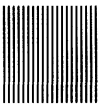


Personal Performatives: Collecting Poetical Definitions of Management

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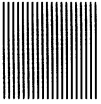
Warsaw University

***Abstract.** In this paper I present several personal performative definitions of management which I collected from a group of students at the Warsaw University's School of Management. The definitions are in the form of short poems. They are rooted in the students' everyday lives and observations as the students take part in management education in Poland, encounter alternative (non-mainstream) ways of looking at organization and management, and experience Poland's transition to a market economy. The poems are ironic and express the author's need for a creative reconstruction of reality.*



Organizing and managing is perhaps one of the oldest human activities. Most people engage in organizing from childhood until the end of their social lives. Organizing, thus, involves thinking and rationality—dimensions that have been emphasized and overemphasized in the management literature—but it also involves feeling. Organizing, in its various manifestations, *is* feeling; yet this is seldom addressed in mainstream management teaching. In this paper I suggest a way for addressing more openly the relationship between feelings and organizing in management pedagogy. I propose an approach that I believe is better suited for expressing the ambivalence and volatility of the managerial experience, a 'method' for exploring domains of organizing that does not flatten them out or translate them into 'rationality'. Poetry is for me such a means of expression and exploration.

The idea of learning about management (and organizations) from lit-



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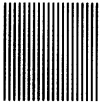
erature and literary experience is not new. It has its roots in narrative science, especially in the reading of fiction in order to learn better management, and in the writing of fiction with the purpose of understanding more about organizational realities (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Knorr Cetina, 1994; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995).

Relationships between passion, expression and organizational realities have also been addressed in our field (e.g. Weick, 1969, 1979). More recently, Claire Cohen (1995) has written about sudden poetry in management textbooks and how this enhances learning, while Heather Höpfl (1995) has considered the relationship between the poetic, rhetoric, and the role of ambiguity in organizational life. This latter text inspired me to think about the feelings of organizing and how they can be communicated. Further, inspiration to explore management through the most private and expressive of emotions, the *sublime* to me via Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1993). Management is intertwined with the sublime, even though it does not necessarily surface as an experience of the participants and the observers. Beauty is indispensable for broadening our notions of management.

Thus, in this paper I have collected a few beautiful definitions of management by some people studying organization. The uniqueness of these definitions is that they were written as poetry. My aim, when collecting them, was to learn about the subversive and subjective experience of talking about management topics. Different from conventional management texts, poetry is powerful in that it does not avoid passion. It is disruptive because it is inconclusive; no Final Voice to end the discussion with a (disinspiring) recapitulation. Quite the contrary; poetry is, in my opinion, not only an 'open text' but also an exploding text, a dangerous mode of expression, shattering space and embracing the reader with an invitation to reach out into the blank fields beyond 'information', outside the relatively safe territory of the orderly textual experience. Moreover, in collecting these definitions I hoped for a journey beyond conventional management text façades which might captivate my interest as a researcher and a person.

The authors of the poems were all participants in a rather atypical course. It was an elective course that I taught during the spring semester of 1995 in my own country, Poland. To my knowledge, it was the only non-functional lecture given at the School of Management of Warsaw University. The course covered briefly many non-mainstream (management) fields and topics such as constructivism, narrative science, organizational aesthetics, etc. Many of these topics were entirely new to the participants. My intention was to present another 'language' that could enable members of the course to reach out into domains of organization science other than the ones traditionally taught at the School. The course was partly conventional lecture and partly a conversation to which all the participants contributed.

In one of these conversational sessions I asked the students to write poems about management. By the end of this poetry-writing activity some students allowed me to collect their textual productions. The poems, with



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two exceptions (my own and the final poem) were originally written in Polish. I translated them into English, and later the authors had a chance to make corrections. Rhymes (when they were used) were translated into blank verse. In the translations I was striving to be as faithful to the original as possible, and also to render the sublime expressed by the poems as I experienced it. The resulting text is, then, a compromise between my desire to be faithful to the Polish original, my own poetic style, and my own reading of the poems. I do not claim to mirror anything accurately, but rather aim at the expression of my own performative definition based on others' expressions (Austin, 1962/1993; Latour, 1986; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1991, 1993).

Austin (1962/1993) defined as 'performatives' statements that determine the state of things. These statements not only communicate but 'perform' as well. Latour (1986), following Austin, proposed a distinction between two definitions of society: the ostensive and the performative. This distinction has been expanded by Czarniawska-Joerges (1991) regarding organizations. According to her, the ostensive definition is based on the assumption that, in principle, it is possible to detect the characteristics of a phenomenon, yet in practice these characteristics might be difficult to identify. Different from this, the performative definition is based on an admission that the phenomenon is too elusive and thus a description of its characteristics is impossible. However, in practice, the actors in the situation construct—i.e. 'perform'—a definition in order to make action possible. Researchers who consider organizations as performatives would treat the organizational actors as legitimate authors of the definition of their situation and concentrate on local knowledge.

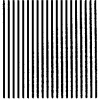
As 'performative' definitions, the collected poems presented below say some interesting things about the authors, the context, and management in a way unlikely to be achieved through other textual genres. They explain practices, but also private ways of taking part in the experience of studying management in Poland during the current transition and intensive political, social and economic changes. They reflect new ways of thinking about organizations and management, grounded in very local and powerful feelings.

The Poems

I have divided the poems into four (plus one) themes: management practices, management education, personal liberation, and personal visions and metaphors. However, these themes are present and overlap in almost all the texts.

Management Practice

In general, students concentrating on management practices write about their future profession and how they see it in the current stereotype of the Polish manager. They do not feel like becoming *that*. They observe it



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critically and laugh. Laughter is rebellion; it empowers. It also opens the possibility for another construction of reality. The first poem is an ironical portrait painted by the author. In the other, the author lurks in the text, waiting to trap the reader.

Once Zdzisiek said to Waldek
—To make a little business would be
nice
we'll take some bucks out of the Polish
Bank
—They'll give us?—Sure!
our brains are OK—
I'll be the boss
and you'll be the vice
our beautiful wives
will do fine as secretaries
—And what will we be doing?
—And what goes now?
—It doesn't wanna go?
Goddammit!
Have we forgotten something?
lost something on the way?
go get an expert
do it fast
let him fix
our dear business fine
so that it will no more
run out of time

Y.G.A.

O wrath of the almighty come
give the eye, agitate
and then please
let live long and well off
the last is not
What is first
Profit is an intersubjective phenom-
enon
I'll be bored to death if I don't shake
this enterprise up
What is important is to perceive, to be
perceived
perceiving, perceived, do not FORGET
Chased, deprived I DO NOT WANT
TO attempt a note
about modesty
Marketing is an art of mystification
Craft or Artism?!?
The most important is when
THE CASH is OK
the class of managers
Away! you white mouse!
'Specialist drink'
(or rather, the trained do)

Jarek Dabrowski

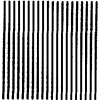
On Management Education

Another broad topic for reflection is management education. What are we being educated in? What is the meaning of this? There was a greater number of poems covering this topic, which is, after all, everyday reality for the students. The poems problematize 'reality'. Some feel good about alternative ways of seeing management and organizations, but there is also bitterness and disillusion in their voices. Irony, but also hope, is present in the first three poems:

Recipe

Take:

half a glass of sociology
2 glasses of psychology
one half kilo of statistics
a spoon of economics
optionally dried fruit
a pinch of fiction (imagination)



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Shake

Keep in a cool, dry place a certain time . . .

P.S. Should be effective

Anonymous

Once upon a time
there was a king
he wanted to tell his son
what it means
to be king
The son listened
about wars
conquests
taxes
dreams
He fell asleep.
Forgot
about wars
conquests
taxes
deals
In his dream
he did not have the time
for this.
He was king

P.K.

I. In the beginning, there was emptiness
well, perhaps some crumbs of information
then the space of earth, ready yet empty

II. The sowing men threw the seeds onto the soil
Some fell where they should not
the wrong time, the wrong place
on soil that was inhospitable, infertile

III. The seeds rested long on the soil
Time could not touch them
They lacked help, impulse?

IV. When the right time came
the act of will, carried with it the helping rain
Some of the seeds developed fast, suddenly

V. A majority remained there, waiting for their time
The growing already developed branches
Some were arrested in their growth

VI. Thus emerged wastelands, some weeds
Here there are meadows, some savannas, a few
woods

Maybe some day they will embrace the whole earth

Adrian Szumski

The next three poems are darker texts. Irony is present here too, but as a force, springing from the texts and stabbing the reader:

Management
grows
and entours
It slides through the brains
and sticks the sensitive

Approaching of the ear
will not 'increase the volume' of the
buzz

Intransparent
does not make a whole

...
Those who do not understand flee
they can stumble
but the meaningless
aggression will demolish
even the doubter .

...

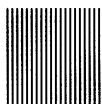
I'm sitting in a small room
I see Ford, I see Sloan
and so what, I think to myself
I'll end up as a jerk anyway

Obviously already Weber created
something
and Koźminski remade it
they won't come up with anything
new

those who are processing us here

How do they process us? My dear
they make us write, they make us read
and what's more my pal
we are supposed to write poems here

Is management art?
perhaps not, but it will be



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Unused brains
are like disgraced
bodies

Magda Kozłowska

A MESS IN MY HEAD
MOTIVATE
MANIPULATE
JUST DON'T BE SURPRISED
THAT ALL THIS HAS NOTHING
TO DO WITH MANAGEMENT

Igor Bielobradek

you have to study with eagerness
all that won't be up to date

Porter is the mentor of Oblój
and Oblój is the mentor of Kostera
and all those guys together
are supposed to be sacred for you

Without this, my dear
your efforts will be vain
it will not be your fate
to become a good manager

Anonymous

On Personal Liberation

A few authors spoke explicitly about the feelings of personal liberation beyond that allowed by the process of education. They are undertaking a quest, and are courageous enough to feel good about their courage. I do not think that they laugh; they smile to themselves, but this self-centred smile is also an invitation to others, a generous offer to join them:

Enterprise and machine
knowledge, science and discipline
Dictators, workers
And walkers on the street . . .

Procedures, technologies and struc-
tures

To me they are like walls,
so let us look down on them from
above!

Anna Antczak

From a peaceful depth of heavy waters
they made us sail out on the stormy
sea
and they drag me, maybe into nets,
towards the endless horizon

Dariusz Jasiński

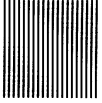
Personal Visions and Metaphors

Some authors are not willing to give away their reactions and feelings explicitly. They produce ambiguity at the same time that they create a space for readers to further feel and to reflect:

A young missionary
stumbles over his complex
before the harvester.

Anonymous

—D—
A bicycle—a screw
—a heart—a note
—a rew—a hrew—a screwcycle
—kidney—screwole—flyo—cheesy—
—pipote—ote—te—CLE
—a little screw—a little bicycle
—a little heart—a male note —



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—a verse—harnote
—barrel—a frame
—+ D

Agata Miotkowska

Miscellaneous

Dark, empty.
I DO NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT IT.
BUT OTHERS DON'T AS WELL ...
MANAGEMENT [this word is not poetical to me]
I CATEGORICALLY REFUSE TO WRITE POEMS!!!

HOW TO MAKE OTHERS WILLING [the rhyme to this is ... killing ...]
AND ... HOW TO MAKE MYSELF WILLING
HOW TO ARRANGE EVERYTHING SO THAT SOMETHING COMES OUT OF
IT.

(O Muse! come for Christ's sake!) [I could dress it up in rhymes]
[such as cash-trash]
Too little has been said [butter-clutter]
And what has been said is? empty? [at least it would be funny]
ESH, I don't understand this

But it has probably some aim
Beata

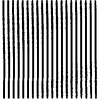
Two More Performatives

Irony was used in all texts. Irony is aggressive, it is strong, it breaks façades, crushes self-beautifying mirrors of kitsch, shatters stereotypes and introduces the powerful individual voice. Irony is creative and generous, the proactive frame of mind. Through irony the authors of the poems have defined reality critically, as something to be changed and reconstructed more in their own terms. Their definitions are creating empty spaces, inventing and delivering ambiguity into their context. They have power.

But, like most authors, I cannot resist the temptation to formulate my own performative definition, beyond collecting reading and trying to understand that of others. I have thus written my own poem, representing my readings of their texts—how I understand what they have been trying to say. My poem, then, is a performative definition of their own performativity:

Management is
about dreams, nets, growing seeds
out of chaos comes liberation
and the gods listen
to deserters' prayers
(sometimes)

Ambiguity is painful



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but also sensual; a necessity
A falling angel, falling veil
curtain falling down onto the stage
(falling in love)

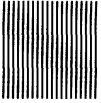
Soon it's time
The rest is science

After I had composed my own meditations in draft form, I shared them with the students. At the same time I presented my own poem to them. The theme of reflection/science had until then been absent in the collected poems (even though expressed as absence in my own poem). Shortly after this meeting one author passed on to me the following text. The author took up the missing theme, but did not fill up the empty space. He talks about Utopia: the vain struggle for meaning, the quest for sense. Through writing the poem the author authorizes this emptiness:

PUTTING ORDER INTO CHAOS
FUTILE
SEARCHING FOR THE FURTHER MEANING
STRUGGLING
TO UNDERSTAND
DISORDER
STILL SEEKING UTOPIA
Jerzy Kociatkiewicz

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