

***Parkinson's Law* and an Ironic Rhetoric of Management**

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ABSTRACT

Cyril Northcote Parkinson, British historian, fiction writer, and, so to say, management guru, in *Parkinson's Law* created his own successful way of critiquing organizational bureaucratization. Parkinson's work falls under the Burkean category of "literature for use," in which affectivity becomes guaranteed by the peculiarity of irony. As Wayne C. Booth suggested, even in the case of "stable irony" there may often be some possibility of further considerations (that is, the factor of uncertainty), despite all the efforts to rhetorically control this type of irony. Booth, however, also noted that a paradoxical situation may arise in which "unstable" irony, intended to be open-ended, becomes capable of creating possibilities for referential reading and practical application. Thus, *Parkinson's Law* provides the duality of entertainment through its satire and the seriousness of its management thoughts (for instance, the relationship of work and time, work and headcount, workforce selection methods, and the extension of committees or departments). These two aspects, constantly intermingling, are examined through the rhetoric of irony working in *Parkinson's Law* and the practical influences it may exert. (AS)

KEYWORDS: C. Northcote Parkinson, Wayne C. Booth, Kenneth Burke, bureaucracy, irony, literature for use, management theory

Parkinson's Law was first published as an article in *The Economist* in 1955, later as an eponymous chapter in a book (Parkinson 1965). Over the past fifty years it has become an

iconic source in the field of organizational bureaucratization. The author, Cyril Northcote Parkinson, was not the typical management guru. He began his career as an expert of naval history (dealing with the topic both in non-fiction and fiction). After the success of *Parkinson's Law* he became a visiting professor of management at universities in the United States, including Harvard and Berkeley. At the end of his life, he became a marketable freelance author-lecturer (see Rogers). Parkinson also wrote a fictitious biography of Jeeves, one of the most memorable characters of British comic novels, created by P. G. Wodehouse.

Parkinson's Law is considered, on the one hand, no more than a humorous piece, an entertainingly ironizing satire about bureaucracy. On the other hand—effacing its original satiric intentions—it has become an extensively-cited work on office or organizational life, and some of its conclusions have grown into premises used in the analysis of organizational behavior and efficiency. For instance, in *The Google Way*, Bernard Girard cites Parkinson's book as seminal in management theory regarding the interrelation between headcount and efficiency. It is, thus, no wonder that despite being categorized as a comic and entertaining work, it has also been referred to as a serious treatise providing authentic analysis of office/corporate life ("Efficiency in Business: The Relevance of Parkinson's Law in the Twenty-First Century"). Although the first sentence of Parkinson's book, "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion" (11), remains the best known and most frequently cited quote, his work does not only produce slogan-like witticisms. Therefore, while he has recommendations of *to-do list* simplicity, his more complex observations provide intelligent, insightful analyses of organizational life. As Cal Newport suggests, in *Parkinson's Law*, there are hidden, delicate implications beneath the author's "fortune-cookie" style advice.

The values of Parkinson were recognized decades ago.¹ Melvin Sykes positions Parkinson as a central figure in the field of the "systematic study of systems," and, within this, of a special branch, "systemantics," which examines the causes and modes of the systems'

dysfunctional operation. Parkinson, thus, joins the company of authors consisting of the famous-infamous Laurence J. Peter, or Dr. John Gall (a pediatrician, who, in an unconventional career, became a systems theorist). This line of influence was first indicated by Gall himself when he identified the founders of systemantics including the “semi-legendary” Murphy’s Law, Count Alfred Korzybski, and the trio of Stephen Potter, C. Northcote Parkinson, and Laurence J. Peter.

Skeptical of systems, Parkinson earned a peculiar position because of his special focus on the everyday dysfunctionalities of workplace life. Through this, he contributed to the renewal of organization studies in the 1950s. After World War II, it became necessary to reconsider Fredrick Winslow Taylor’s mechanic-engineering methodology intended to rationalize industrial production through the numerical and empirical data collected by monitoring work time. This approach considered human workers only as processing components to be subordinated absolutely to the process of industrial production. In contrast to Taylorism, after World War II, the critique of the bureaucratic approach to scientific management became dominant. One of the first examples of this tendency was William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956). Also, in the middle of the twentieth century, Peter Drucker offered new perspectives in the field of organizational studies. According to John J. Tarrant’s monograph, Drucker, having perceived the restraint of the management studies’ engineering approach, intended to provide philosophical depth for the examination of organizational life and management (3-17). As Parkinson, in the foreword to Tarrant’s book, also recognized, there was a kind of intellectual and spiritual interest in the center of Drucker’s ideas on management (Parkinson, “Foreword” xi-xii). Drucker insisted that modern organizational society had to find its way back to certain spiritual and moral values.² This perspective reveals the peculiar characteristics of Drucker’s mindset—the transcendental and philosophical sensibilities, which otherwise had been previously ignored in organizational and management studies.

In this regard, one of the worthy followers of Drucker is Charles Handy, who is considered to be the British Peter Ducker. He is universally acknowledged nowadays as the most outstanding philosopher of management theory, and is sometimes called a visionary, a prophet, and a preacher in our modern society (Heller 5). As Lawrence M. Fisher claims in his overarching portrait, “If Peter Drucker is responsible for legitimizing the field of management and Tom Peters for popularizing it, then Charles Handy should be known as the person who gave it a philosophical elegance and eloquence that was missing from the field” (Fisher). Handy’s multilayered background and interests combine humanities erudition, business experience, management theory, and spiritual-moral sensibility. Thus, he was a mediating figure among different areas and has definitely become a pathfinder in the fields of management thinking and life conduct.³

In the framework of the post-World War II renewal of management studies, Parkinson’s work, however, reveals more impressively its unique characteristics. Parkinson—by diverging from the philosophical and spiritual approach hallmarked, for instance, by Drucker and Handy—created his own successful way of critiquing organizational bureaucratization.

The peculiarity of *Parkinson’s Law* may be revealed genuinely if it is reckoned as “literature for use” in the Burkean sense. As Kenneth Burke suggests, this type of literary production does not focus mainly on the virtuosity of poetic/narrative characteristics, though it does not lack literary/rhetoric qualities, but instead on a kind of social/cultural process of identity-formation, that is, the dynamics of identifying with different roles and experimenting with different perspectives (5). This possibility of perspective-switch is multiplied in *Parkinson’s Law*, not in the least because of the work’s skillful play with irony. In fact, there often remains some food for further thought (due to factors of uncertainty), even in instances of “stable irony.” Wayne C. Booth originally considered stable (or finite) irony as easily identifiable, stopped at an appropriate point, not open for further interpretations, and thus also

avoiding the danger of being taken seriously and literally. The possibility of openness, however, as Paul de Man suggested in his reading of Booth (166), may appear despite all the efforts of rhetorical control. Even if this controlling mechanism, by diverging from common knowledge in surprising ways, is supposed to increase the probability of identifying irony and so stabilizing it as a “finite” process (Booth 6). On the other hand, we should never forget Booth’s warning which suggests that by destabilizing irony, a paradoxical situation may arise where the open-ended character of irony may also serve as a bond between the possibilities of referential reading and practical application (240-50). Similarly to these *intersections* of stable and unstable types of irony, *Parkinson’s Law* provides a kind of a *blend* of satirical entertainment and serious insights for management theory (for instance, the relationship of work and time, work and headcount, aspects of workforce selection methods, and the extension of committees or departments).

This paper analyzes this mixture through the rhetoric of irony working in *Parkinson’s Law* with special attention to some of the practical influences of Parkinson’s book.

***Argumentatio*: the ironizing process of a management satire**

Parkinson’s Law, while adopting literary devices (satire and irony) in order to distance itself from management studies, also reconnects with this field through its considerations about organizational theory.⁴ Already in the preface of the book, a parodistic and, hence, imitative playfulness is established by Parkinson’s reinterpretation of management science:

Heaven forbid that students should cease to read books on the science of public or business administration—provided only that these works are classified as fiction. Placed between the novels of Rider Haggard and H. G. Wells, intermingled with volumes about ape men and space ships, these textbooks could harm no one. Placed elsewhere, among

works of reference, they can do more damage than might at first sight seem possible.

(9)

Classifying these works as (science) fiction, Parkinson claims his own book is a legitimate and reliable scientific source:

Dismayed to realize what other people suppose to be the truth about civil servants or building plans, I have occasionally tried to provide, for those interested, a glimpse of reality. The reader of discrimination will guess that these glimpses of the truth are based on no ordinary experience. In the expectation, moreover, that some readers will have less discrimination than others, I have been careful to hint, occasionally, casually, at the vast amount of research upon which my theories are founded. (9)

However, immediately after this, his train of thought unveils itself—though it seems to confirm the scientific nature of the book, Parkinson's argument may still leave the reader in uncertainty.

Let the reader picture to himself the wall charts, card-index cabinets, calculating machines, slide-rules, and reference works that may be thought the indispensable background to a study such as this. Let him then be assured that the reality dwarfs all his imagining, and that the truths here revealed are the work not merely of an admittedly gifted individual but of a vast and costly research establishment. An occasional reader may feel that more detailed description should have been given of the experiments and calculations upon which these theories rest. Let him reflect, however, that a volume so elaborate would take longer to read and cost more to buy. (9-10)

Parkinson gives a satirically exaggerated list of research tools imagined only in the reader's mind. By doing so, he suggests, indirectly, the greatness of his own research, because while he positions the traditional methods of *hard* science as only parts of imagination, he announces that his work, as part of reality, convincingly exceeds these *serious* methods; therefore, *Parkinson's Law* should be considered more authentic than the traditional scientific tools. However, readers receive no detailed description of Parkinson's own research methodology, and the "vast and costly research establishment" also remains unidentified. On the other hand, *Parkinson's Law* does not ignore completely the perspective of management theory, neither does it fit in the category of comic literature. The reader, thus, is left in but a labyrinth of irony, where authorial statements gain uncertainty, constantly oscillating between probability and improbability.

Consequently, already at the beginning of Parkinson's work, irony reveals one of its main peculiarities. As Linda Hutcheon claimed, irony, instead of being only something more than the said (61), can be described by a "both/and model." This model suggests that "ironic meaning is *simultaneously* double (or multiple), and that therefore you don't actually have to reject a 'literal' meaning in order to get at what is usually called the 'ironic' or 'real' meaning of the utterance" (58). Furthermore, irony itself cannot be identified with only one of two meanings, because it provides a new one (a third platform) shaped by the two original implications. Similarly, Booth described the act of reading irony as climbing to a higher level of "dwelling places," a term coined by him for naming the terrains of the ironic process, which offer more than "the simple two-platform plunge, implied by all definitions of irony as 'saying the opposite of what you mean'" (36). He argues that "there is always a sense in which part of the new view is a look back upon the old inferior dwelling, the moving van is perhaps better described as travelling upward to a nicer part of town" (36). This interpretation of irony can also be adapted to Parkinson; in spite of the fact that his preface claims the fictitiousness of

management studies, and seems to suggest the vanity of management theory, Parkinson constructs a special version of it, a liminal area between science and comic literature. Thus, he in fact provides a new (experimental) platform for the management thinking he originally intended to criticize.

It is tempting to read Parkinson within the dichotomy provided by Paul de Man's discussion on the different interpretations of irony. De Man identifies the traditional figures of Hellenic comedy with opposing discourses. In his narrative, *eiron*, who is the "smart guy" but turns out to be the dumb one, represents German romantic criticism of irony, while *alazon*, who is the "dumb guy" but eventually turns out to be the smart one, is the representative of American critics of irony (and Booth himself, as their main figure). Booth deserves this role because of his down-to-earth (empirical) approach to irony, which, as de Man claims, "doesn't get involved in definitions or in the theory of tropes." Instead, he focuses on the practical question of what is ironic, and that of how one may know that there is irony in a text (165). Booth himself described his work in a similar fashion:

It may be true that concepts have a life of their own of the kind Kierkegaard implies; I believe that they do and that this kind of inquiry thus not only is exciting but even has a kind of validity. But one cannot easily solve my kind of question while dwelling on his level: to deal with specific ironies in the "real world," to understand how they make themselves understood or fail to do so, is not done by looking at how abstract ideas interrelate conceptually in the "the realer world." (xiii)

However, even Booth, (self-)positioned above as a practical thinker, had to face the struggle with abstract/philosophical problems.⁵ Through these unanticipated theoretical insights, pragmatic Booth and American criticism, positioned as the *alazon* because of their common-

sense mindset, occasionally may show some philosophical affinity, which is primarily attributed to German Romanticism.⁶

The considerations of Booth and de Man provide such a pattern for modeling the relationship between Parkinson and management theory, which helps us appreciate the very particular values of *Parkinson's Law*. If he is compared with philosophical and transcendental management theorists (such as Drucker and Handy), Parkinson's down-to-earth approach and light-hearted rhetoric of skepticism about management comes closer to Booth's pragmatic position. This characteristic can be demonstrated by revealing the role and effects of irony in Parkinson in more detail.

Nevertheless, it would be too simple to claim that *Parkinson's Law*, because of its parody of management books, is only a comic and, thus, irrelevant work to practical/workplace life. It contains several passages where the ridiculousness is so astounding that it frames propositions which, in their provocative or exaggerated forms, may provide novel insights for management theory in some topics. What follows the analysis of three examples taken from three different chapters of *Parkinson's Law* will demonstrate this assumption.

Parkinson's chapter on the dilemmas of HR selection methods offers a description of the bygone practice of nepotism as follows:

The British method (old pattern) depended on an interview in which the candidate had to establish his identity. He would be confronted by elderly gentlemen seated round a mahogany table who would presently ask him his name. Let us suppose that the candidate replied, "John Seymour." One of the gentlemen would then say, "Any relation of the Duke of Somerset?" To this the candidate would say, quite possibly, "No, sir." Then another gentleman would say, "Perhaps you are related, in that case, to the Bishop of Watminster?" If he said "No, sir" again, a third would ask in despair, "To whom then

are you related?" In the event of the candidate's saying, "Well, my father is a fishmonger in Cheapside," the interview was virtually over. (21)

Then he outlines the modern procedure of interviewing, which should be the opposite of the old method of nepotism:

The British method (new pattern) was evolved in the late nineteenth century as something more suitable for a democratic country. The Selection Committee would ask briskly, "What school were you at?" and would be told Harrow, Haileybury, or Rugby, as the case might be. "What games do you play?" would be the next and invariable question. A promising candidate would reply, "I have played tennis for England, cricket for Yorkshire, rugby for the Harlequins, and fives for Winchester." The next question would then be "Do you play polo?"—just to prevent the candidate's thinking too highly of himself. Even without playing polo, however, he was evidently worth serious consideration. Little time, by contrast, was wasted on the man who admitted to having been educated at Wiggleworth. "Where?" the chairman would ask in astonishment, and "Where's that?" after the name had been repeated. "Oh, in *Lancashire!*" he would say at last. Just for a matter of form, some member might ask, "What games do you play?" But the reply "Table tennis for Wigan, cycling for Blackpool, and snooker for Wiggleworth" would finally delete his name from the list. (Parkinson 24)

These two passages may create confusion, since there is an obvious parallel between them. The old and new selection methods appear to be identical with each other in their structure. Though we would assume, on the basis of their chronological opposition, that their relationship was dominated by change, deviation, or antithesis, this is not the case. This, claims Hutcheon, is one

of the most important but mostly forgotten characteristics of irony: “Even a brief consideration of the most common rhetorical devices deployed in ironic texts will show that antiphrasis explains only some of them, such as litotes and contradiction; whereas, on the contrary, hyperbole works by excess, not opposition, and meiosis operates by playing down more than by playing against” (61). The ironic effect, which is produced not simply by opposition but by reiteration combined with refunctionalization and exaggeration, also dominates the relationship of the old and new selection practices in Parkinson. While the modern method should differ from the old, that is, qualification-based fairness should replace nepotism, the elitist logic of the new method copies the pattern of the old practice step by step. Parodizing hyperbole, however, is also built into the reiteration. It is quite ironic when the personal characteristics of the aristocratic lineage and nepotistic kinship of the old decades are replaced by the modern democratized society’s impersonal aspects of educational and sports background.⁷ The interviewing process itself remains unchanged; the same elitist selection method is applied to decide how deeply the applicant is embedded in an exclusive network. In other words, when one cannot introduce and legitimize themselves by a short name of a relative or decent bloodline, they—as a compensation—try to be convincing with the help of a hyperbolic list about schooling and community activities. The elitist gatekeepers are only interested in the most basic information about the applicant’s personal relations and insider embeddedness instead of the long enumeration of institutional guarantees.

The dynamism of repetition and exaggeration in irony is also stressed by Booth, though in a different terminology. The logic of repetitiveness may be observed in the foundation of his ideal (stable) type of irony. Booth bases the desired stability of ironizing acts on the logic of shared convictions (the common-sense perspective) of rhetorical thinking, even if it may be considered to be the spirit of “dried-up pedantry” (1-31). Since he really does believe that

if I cannot find some point of contact with notions of what implies threat, some point on which we can stand in agreement as we explore our disagreements, I can never hope to change your mind. The process is not of course confined to what is conventionally thought of as rhetoric; all communication, including education and inquiry, can only move from the known to the unknown. (34)

That is why *A Rhetoric of Irony* suggests that the field of *topoi*, which “may seem to modern readers uninvitingly routine and repetitive” (Booth 34), should be taken more seriously and studied in depth. The understanding of the reiterative logic of commonplace topics and formulas becomes more important in light of the dilemma of controlling the stability of irony by stopping/limiting it at the appropriate point. This is Booth’s central question of how we can detect clues to irony in texts or statements, while he also acknowledges that there are no standardized marks which can help us in every situation. The main principle of identifying intended and finite irony is that we probably have more than a suspicion if we can discover any level of oddity, absurdity, and outlandishness in comparison with facts laid down previously, and we are aware of the usual style of an author or a genre, and common convictions (47-86). This is important in controlling irony because, by the visibly extreme violation of standards or consistency, the ironizing act should have the possibility of uncovering itself, and thus prevent the reader from any overinterpretations.

So, for the perception and reading of intended irony, the minimal requirement is a certain level of exaggeration or extremity serving as an indicating and controlling device. Another requirement is the foundation of a community of minds, that is, a group of shared judgments on what others may say or think about a topic, which serves as a basis for the estimation of the level of oddity or exaggeration in question. As Booth stated, “Except for unstable or private ironies or ‘put-ons,’ not now our concern, general fashions of belief [or even conventionally

held errors] are more useful in reading irony than esoteric but solidly grounded knowledge” (59).⁸

In the light of Booth’s considerations, the dynamism of repetition and hyperbole detected in Parkinson’s second chapter on HR selection can be identified with the process of stable irony. In this case, the foundation of the common-sense ground is the known idea of progression implied in the chronological opposition of the old and the new. The act of discovering oddity and sensing the tension behind it in Parkinson can be recognized as a surprising structural similarity between the nepotistic and meritocratic interviews (and so, this repetitive parallelism may be the extreme realization of what Booth called the community of minds or shared judgment). The controlling effect of irony strengthens itself when Parkinson’s description accentuates the extreme absurdity of the modern meritocratic obsession with the institutional legitimization of, for example, educational or sports achievements. Through this obsession, meritocracy-based selection becomes as elitist, exclusive, and non-practical as that of its counterpart, nepotism and its reverence for noble lineage (both of them ignoring the importance of actual work experience), whereas the meritocratic approach should actually replace—and not copy—the logic of nepotism. Thus, the absurdity of parallelism between the old and new methods of HR selection seems to expose itself only as a satiric argument (finite irony), not intended to be taken seriously. However, the proposition of similarity does not disappear from the reader’s reception, and that is why the parallel between nepotistic thinking and meritocracy, basically ironic and frivolous, may still leave some traits of probability in the reader’s mind, suggesting that the old and new methods of HR selection, supposed to be different, may not be quite antithetical.

The mechanism of stable irony is also present in the first—eponymous—chapter of Parkinson’s work, which was first published, independently, in *The Economist*. Here the argument appeals again to shared knowledge (that is, to common experience about work),

stating that “Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. General recognition of this fact is shown in the proverbial phrase, ‘It is the busiest man who has time to spare’” (Parkinson 11). To strengthen his claim, Parkinson outlines an everyday situation:

Thus, an elderly lady of leisure can spend the entire day in writing and dispatching a postcard to her niece at Bognor Regis. An hour will be spent in finding the postcard, another in hunting for spectacles, half an hour in a search for the address, an hour and a quarter in composition, and twenty minutes in deciding whether or not to take an umbrella when going to the pillar box in the next street. The total effort that would occupy a busy man for three minutes. (11)

Then, relying on the lack of cause-effect relation between the amounts of time and labor, he goes on to expand his analysis, and draws the conclusion that “there need be little or no relationship between the work to be done and the size of the staff to which it may be assigned. A lack of real activity does not, of necessity, result in leisure. A lack of occupation is not necessarily revealed by a manifest idleness” (Parkinson 11). While this is not entirely surprising (“This fact is widely recognized . . .”), neither is it thought over consistently with regard to its consequences, as “. . . less attention has been paid to its wider implications” (Parkinson 11). Thus, Parkinson’s way of raising the issue must still be acknowledged as a thought-provoking insight, at least in its deviation from ingrained elements of common belief: “politicians and taxpayers have assumed (with occasional phases of doubt) that a rising in total in the number of civil servants must reflect a growing volume of work to be done” (11).

So far, the famous first chapter of *Parkinson’s Law* has demonstrated the typical steps of the Boothian method of stable irony,⁹ and Parkinson’s argument remains in this framework also at the closing of the ironizing process. Since he reaches such a level of exaggeration in the

exposition of his thesis that it may be a warning hint for anyone wishing to uncover (and thus to stabilize) irony. That is, for anybody considering the statement by Parkinson, “the fact is that the number of the officials and the quantity of work are not related to each other at all,” to be a piece of universal truth. The exaggeration is present in Parkinson’s ambition to create a mathematical formula of his own law, applicable for “any public administrative department.” Furthermore, Parkinson suggests by this formula that the process of increasing staff should be accompanied by considering components such as the number of staff seeking promotion through the appointment of subordinates, the difference between the ages of appointment and retirement, the number of man-hours devoted to answering minutes within the department, the number of effective units being administered, and the number of new staff required each year (19-20). Yet, despite all the exaggerations, the reader cannot deny the credibility of the common workplace experience presented in the the opening of the first chapter of Parkinson’s work (“Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion”). This may explain why this sentence has become such a famous aphorism, witty and noteworthy in the field of management and work organization.

The third chapter of *Parkinson’s Law*, which focuses on the ever-growing world of committees and meetings, offers more insights from the perspective of the Boothian concept of irony. The historical overview of the development of the British cabinet, as shared knowledge and the basis of the argument, prompts the rather peculiar conclusion that exact headcounts can be spotted in every official body, which may be the actual hindrance to operatibility.

A study of the British example would suggest that the point of ineffectiveness in a cabinet is reached when the total membership exceeds 20 or perhaps 21. . . . We might be tempted to conclude from this that cabinets—or other committees—with a membership in excess of 21 are losing the reality of power and that those with a larger

membership have already lost it. . . . Some comitologists would accept that conclusion without further research. Others emphasize the need for careful investigations, more especially around the borderline of 21. But the coefficient of inefficiency must lie between 19 and 22 is now very generally agreed. (Parkinson 40-41)

Already indicated by the fake scientific term of *comitology*, the ironic point of view becomes definite in the hyperbolic summary of the objectives and achievements of committee studies:

So much is certain. But the root cause of the trouble goes deeper and has still, in part, to be explored. Too many vital factors are unknown. What is the shape and size of the table? What is the average age of those present? At what hour does the committee meet? In an article for the non-specialist it would be absurd to repeat the calculations by which the first and tentative coefficient of inefficiency has been reached. It should be enough to state that prolonged research at the Institute of Comitology has given rise to a formula which is now widely (although not universally) accepted by the experts in this field. (Parkinson 40-43)

However, the reader, with all this in mind, may still have the suspicion that there indeed have to be some kinds of limits, calculative methods, and research tools of headcount to enable an effective work organization. Thus, even if Parkinson's suggestions are satirical and hyperbolic to some extent, these ironic propositions may inspire the readers to further consider the problem of headcount at the workplace.

All the three chapters of *Parkinson's Law* analyzed exemplify the case in which however *stabilized* the mechanism of irony is (or at least is intended to be), there may be, as Booth himself acknowledged, some room for unpredictable consequences or further

connotations. In other words, irony intended to be finite (that is, to be stopped at the most appropriate and thus not yet dangerous point), may also be open for meanings and responses not compatible with the authorial intention. Moreover, the other directions interpretations might take are sometimes ironizing acts targeting the original one, yet on a different level. In Booth's own words:

Stable irony is always in this sense potentially unstable, but there is no doubt the stability was intended. No critic of the irony chooses to accept the original statement at face value, or fails to understand precisely what its invitation is. The act of reconstructing *meaning* is itself run clear an accurate and stable enough: the two dwellings are seen for what they are and the invitation to leave one and choose the other is accepted. That such a choice can be then undermined with further ironies, intended by the reader who now becomes an intending ironist in his own right, is part of the significance the text may require. (37)

Similarly, the conclusion of the famous fourteenth footnote of *A Rhetoric of Irony* reveals: "Irony in itself opens up doubts as soon as its possibility enters our heads, and there is no inherent reason for discontinuing the process of doubt at any point short of infinity" (Booth 59). This insight somewhat refines Booth's concept of irony. For instance, when he is dealing with the perception of clues to irony, he becomes more open toward "finite" irony's stability created by authorial intentions, as "the visible violation of the standard of consistency [that is, the requirement of the recognition of an ironizing act] depends on standards that are by no means independent of what the reader brings to the passage" (Booth 69). As he explains, the role of the reader's own competence, peculiar point of view, or mindset, are undeniably important in the perception of irony, since we are not very likely to detect it if it is similar to our beliefs.

And vice versa, it is more probable that the reader takes a straight statement as ironic when it significantly differs from her/his mindset (Booth 81).¹⁰

The dilemma of open-endedness, uncertainties, and further connotations caused by the reader's independence not only points out the complexity of Booth's approach, but it also leads us to a new level of the interpretation of *Parkinson's Law*. It can happen that a hyperbolic proposition, which appears to be *just* a piece of closed (stable) irony, can become, by being situated in a new context, open-ended to such an extent that the reader eventually acknowledges that it can be justified to take a proposition literally; one which was ironic in its first context, but which, through a switch of perspective, can still offer useful insights, and can be applied to practical fields.

Peroratio: literature for use at the workplace

What consequence does the possibility of open-endedness (that is, the factor of uncertainty) have in the case of stable irony? Despite all the efforts to rhetorically control irony, which, by diverging from common knowledge in surprising ways, should increase the probability of identifying and handling stable irony as a "finite" process (Booth 6). The possibility of openness results in opportunities of further considerations even in the case of the stable type of irony. Finite irony, which was considered as easily identifiable by Booth, for it is stopped at an appropriate point and is not open for further interpretations, avoids the danger of being taken seriously or literally. However, manifestations of stable irony which become unstabilized can still provide greater freedom for interpretation, but they also create a paradoxical situation. Because the *opened* and continuously renewing uncertainty of being taken seriously, or read as a playful satire, may lead some readers at some point to the level of referential interpretation (that is, to the field of practical application). Nevertheless, this

applicative step results as much in the ending of ironizing acts as—according to Booth’s conclusion—in the intention of understanding irony.¹¹

Parkinson’s second chapter focusing on HR policy can serve as an example of this applicative interpretation. It reveals that irony, humor, and playfulness are elements not only of Parkinson’s critique, but also of his solutions in the fields of recruiting and selection. Having surveyed different HR methods (written exams, intelligence, and personality tests), he draws the conclusion that each of these procedures is imperfect and useless. Instead, he offers a solution he considers the most appropriate one: the number of candidates for the position should be reduced already by the job advertisement itself. “Only a little thought is needed to convince us that the perfect advertisement would attract only one reply and that from the right man” (Parkinson 28). If the job advertisement attracts too many applications, the number of inappropriate applicants will also rise to an unmanageable height and result in a lot of time and energy wasted. So, what should be done during recruitment and selection? Parkinson gives a groundbreaking and, in its ironic manner, truly extreme answer: “the *aim* should be so to balance the inducement in salary against the possible risks involved that only a single applicant will appear” (29; emphasis in original). As to what kind of tools could be applied by this type of HR strategy, he suggests patterns we met in bedtime stories should be followed:

Were we to turn, instead, to the fairy stories we learned in childhood, we should realize that at the period to which these stories relate far more satisfactory methods were in use.

When the king had to choose a man to marry his eldest or only daughter and so inherit the kingdom, he normally planned some obstacle course from which only the right candidate would emerge with credit. (30)

Should we think that this procedure is not adaptable in our modern times, we are reminded that

An administrator able to command the services of psychologists, psychiatrists, alienists, statisticians, and efficiency experts is not perhaps in a worse (or better) position than one relying upon hideous crones and fairy godmothers. . . . Their means of assessment would seem, at any rate, to be strictly comparable. All that is required is to translate the technique of the fairy story into a form applicable to the modern world. (30-31)

Although it is one of the most extreme and exaggerated passages in Parkinson, thus, on the basis of Booth's theory, it is very likely to be ironic in its character, it may still sound more realistic when recontextualized from the perspective of some current practical considerations of HR management used in real-life processes of the job market, as discussed in the works of HR specialist Liz Ryan.

A contributor to *Forbes* and several other media outlets in the fields of company management, job hunting, and recruiting, Ryan is also the founder of the coaching company Human Workplace. She calls for a necessary change of mindset of HR management in several of her articles, for example, in "How to Write Your Human-Voiced Resume" and "You Are Smart and Cool—So Why Is Your Resume So Boring?" The stereotypical patterns and viewpoints, recurrent in job advertisements and HR selection methods, are not only dull, but also definitely damaging, she claims, because they produce a kind of automatic, simplified, "zombie" thinking both at the end of jobseekers and employers. Therefore, we should search for other solutions, which could reveal the totality and vividness of the applicant's personality ("How to Write Your Human-Voiced Resume").

In "Fire Up Your Resume with Dragon-Slaying Stories!," Ryan suggests that jobseekers should demonstrate their achievements through a "human-voiced resume" which contains "dragon-slayer stories." Applicants ought to get rid of the stereotypical requirements of the

classic curriculum vitae formats and create an unconventional document full of peculiar and colorful micro-narratives providing not only dates, position names, and banal keywords, but revealing the applicant's skills and accomplishments in specific and expressive life situations. In "Want to Hire Humans? Try Recruiting with a Human Voice!," Ryan looks at a company's job advertisement that lacks a summary of the expectations for the position. Instead, it assigns little practical tasks candidates are expected to perform during the application procedure, tasks which demonstrate the jobseeker's skills instantly. In her *Reinvention Roadmap*, a book-long version of her insights and advice on career development, Ryan demonstrates the rhetorical effect mechanism of a "human-voiced resume" through the case of Sarah Phan. Sarah dreamt of leaving the service sector where she worked, and, for the successful realization of her desired objective, she wrote and submitted a human-voiced resume. The dragon-slayer stories elaborated in this innovative type of curriculum vitae helped her to continuously reframe her professional past according to the changing requirements of different employers. Through the example of Sara Phan, Ryan points out that a storifying self-introduction—even situation-setting or chronotopic story openings like "When our owner was out of the country"—shows more, and more subtly, about the job seeker's achievements and personality (embedded in the context of exact challenges or tasks) than the didactic and forced messages of the simple, short, and clichéd self-describing phrases, such as "I'm a take-charge person." In fact, the applicant does not talk about herself merely but, by way of a distancing solution, that is, by the description of a given situation or problem, she constructs an argument that can objectively assess her suitability.

Examples like these also explain why the tale-like narratives and heroic challenges proposed by Parkinson have since become part of the best practices of contemporary HR management. The literary perspective, created by the tools of satire, exaggeration, and the absurd, can transcend the conventional logic of management thinking, and, through its playful

nature, produce experimental proposals, some of which can then be rechanneled into management or workplace life. As a consequence, *Parkinson's Law* becomes, as already stated, an example of "literature for use," which, albeit not primarily or solely, places poetic/narrative virtuosity into the center of attention. The works of literature for use, though they do not lack literary/rhetorical qualities, focus on a kind of social/cultural process of identity-formation, that is, on the dynamics of identifying with different roles and experimenting with the shifts from one perspective to another.

In Burke's view, the applicative feature ("use"), in spite of its name, can be interpreted as the exact opposite of instrument-like and mechanical usefulness, because the identifying process gains a kind of *witchcraft* characteristic, "and is thus also a kind of 'literature for use,' use at one remove, though of a sort that the technologically-minded would consider the very opposite of use, since it is wholly in the order of ritual and magic" (5). The introductory analysis of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, for example, argues that Milton's *Samson Agonistes* "would be 'literature for use': the poetic reenactment of Samson's role could give pretexts for admitting a motive which, if not so clothed or complicated, if confronted in its simplicity, would have been inadmissible" (5). Hence, the *useful* aspects should be subtle applications, as Burke put it, "clothed or complicated" (5), which are not directly transferred into the field of practical life. Booth describes this peculiarity as a kind of *indirectness* of irony, and he attributes to it a surplus of effect, since it cannot be simplified or traced back to an opposite original (straight) message (109). The real achievement of this indirectness lies in a twisting rhetorical "cleverness" (43), which is capable of creating the "mixture of truth and madness" (109) that can hardly be realized by other forms of communication. The special combination of intellectual exercise, emotional engagement, and practical—though not directly instrumentalized—aspects (Booth 117) may provide a very robust and multilayered space for ironic literature for use.

Even when reading *Parkinson's Law* as applied literature in the Burkean sense, I obviously do not intend to attribute to it the poetic or narrative complexity created by the *reductio ad absurdum* method of literary fiction. However, we can take Parkinson's bureaucracy satire as a forerunner of a recently extended subfield, that of office literature.¹² Novelist Joshua Ferris argues in his essay "Nine to Five" that office literature, from Herman Melville's classic "Bartleby the Scrivener" to the works of contemporary George Saunders, does not only provide an authentic description of office life, but has the ability to transcend everyday realities, and thus reach unexpectedly liberating new insights by means of, among others, imaginative wit, black humor, and the absurd (Ferris).

Unlike office literature, *Parkinson's Law* does not reach the level of *reductio ad absurdum*. Nevertheless, it still has *literary* value—to be meant literally. Parkinson's work, in comparison with recent popular audiovisual (film and television) workplace-satires (*Office Space*, *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn 99*), points out the advantages of the mediality of the printed book. That is, only written works (including *Parkinson's Law* and other bureaucracy or workplace satires in the same vein) are able to convey the kind of complexity which blends the characteristics of ironic playfulness and serious insights or, at least, their seeds. On the one hand, Parkinson's treatise, though it plays with the (satirical) possibility of it being a work of management science, with its ironical tone throughout, distances itself from scientific texts, but, at the same time, offers some possibilities to re-open the question of uncertainty in whether to take his propositions ironically or literally. On the other hand, Parkinson, while creating a skillful rhetoric dynamism of stabilizing and destabilizing irony, does not intend to disguise his book as a piece of fiction. Furthermore, *Parkinson's Law*, because of the ambiguities and uncertainties about its ironic stance, prevents itself from being categorized merely as part of comic literature. This aspect of duality, ambiguity, or transitive nature cannot be sustained in films or television series of the mockumentary genre, which deny

even the possibility of being viewed as non-fiction. In contrast, in written works, including *Parkinson's Law*, the ambiguity is sustainable, and thus the reader gains freedom to combine satiric-absurdist humor and serious insights, or practical applications, and to experience the interplay of figurative and literal readings—as is apt for genuine “literature for use.”

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Notes

¹ For instance, in 1978, Sykes in “Of Men and Laws” observed, while not forgetting about *The Peter Principle*, which is considered to be a direct continuation of *Parkinson's Law*, that

Parkinson's work was refined and extended by Lawrence [sic] Peter and Raymond Hull in *The Peter Principle* . . . *The Peter Principle* is not in the science or social science section of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library but in the literature section under satire. This is certainly strange, because the book has been most frequently cited and discussed in the serious scholarly literature of political science and public and business administration. (46)

This paper, however, wishes to reveal not only the ways of how the bureaucracy satire is capable of confusing and challenging the rigidity of genre and library categorizations, but also to provide a peculiar context for *Parkinson's Law*, as the remark about the relationship between the works of Parkinson and Peter suggests.

² These values would include compassion, that is, “the deep experience that the Thou and I are one” (Tarrant 46).

³ It is no accident that Handy was on the BBC radio program *Thought for the Day* for ten years, as the only layman among several ecclesiastical persons. Handy, in his two- or three-

minute radio mini-sermons, which were later also published in book format (see Handy, *Thoughts for the Day*), searched for the moral obligations and transcendental perspectives of everyday life conduct and labor. Through his *media vicar* activity, he reached millions of radio listeners, and thus became a widely known personality in the United Kingdom; he was seen as both a management and a spiritual affairs guru. However, being called a guru “would probably send a frisson down his spine” (Fisher).

⁴ He is able to formulate such considerations only because his point of view is outside of the usual scientific mindset of management studies.

⁵ With Booth, de Man suggests, the philosophical problem may be that while trying to arrive at a decision on the ironic characteristic of a text, “you can always put in question whatever decision you make once you think you have arrived at that decision” (166).

⁶ The allegory of the simple-minded guy who suddenly becomes capable of complex thinking is not based on the subtle and well-documented developments of literary and intellectual history but, instead, on the stereotypes of national characteristics, through which both Booth and de Man contrast the reasonable Anglo-Saxons with the sublime and philosophically elevated Germans. As Booth advises, “. . . fellow romantics, do not push the irony too far, or you will pass from the joyful laughter of *Tristram Shandy* into the Teutonic gloom. Read Schlegel” (211). De Man, however, argues that “[i]t would have been difficult, though not impossible, but more difficult, for Wayne Booth to write this way, and to write the sentence I’ve just quoted, if he had been more cognizant of the German tradition which has dealt with the problem, rather than centering his argument as he does on the practice of eighteenth-century English fiction” (167).

⁷ The applicants try to meet these requirements by collecting as many institutional titles and trophies as possible in the complicated schooling system.

⁸ The ideal example of this mechanism could be one of the most iconic works of ironic literature, *A Modest Proposal*, because Swift's essay is capable of deceiving all of its readers, and then leading them to realize and also accept their deception (see Booth 106)

⁹ That is, the method of breaking away from a set of common beliefs by proposing a new, surprising aspect.

¹⁰ It is quite telling that when Booth discusses the problem that occurs in ironic attacks where the pretended advocacy may be much more easily read as serious statements, and thus "irony cannot take in all readers all the time" (76), he uses as an example a satiric essay by William H. Whyte, whose essay, published under a pseudonym in *Fortune Magazine* in 1954, appeared one year earlier than Parkinson's article in *The Economist*. It could be subject of future research to explore whether Whyte could have any influence on Parkinson regarding the experimentation with the ironic tone in the field of management studies.

¹¹ "It is not irony but the desire to understand irony that brings such a chain to a stop. And that is why a rhetoric of irony is required if we are not to be caught, as many men of our time have claimed to be caught, in an infinite regress of negations" (Booth 59).

¹² For more on the office novel, see Ellis, "Then We Came to the Next Office Novel," and Lanchester, "When Fiction Breaks Down."

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