LIFE
A USER'S
MANUAL

Georges Perec

Translated by David Bellos

Preamble

The eye follows the paths that have
been laid down for it in the work
(Paul Klee, *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*)

To begin with, the art of jigsaw puzzles seems of little substance, easily exhausted, wholly dealt with by a basic introduction to Gestalt: the perceived object – we may be dealing with a perceptual act, the acquisition of a skill, a physiological system, or, as in the present case, a wooden jigsaw puzzle – is not a sum of elements to be distinguished from each other and analysed discretely, but a pattern, that is to say a form, a structure: the element's existence does not precede the existence of the whole, it comes neither before nor after it, for the parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts: knowledge of the pattern and of its laws, of the set and its structure, could not possibly be derived from discrete knowledge of the elements that compose it. That means that you can look at a piece of a puzzle for three whole days, you can believe that you know all there is to know about its colouring and shape, and be no further on than when you started. The only thing that counts is the ability to link this piece to other pieces, and in that sense the art of the jigsaw puzzle has something in common with the art of go. The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled; in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing – just an impossible question, an opaque challenge. But as soon as you have succeeded, after minutes of trial and error, or after a prodigious half-second flash of inspiration, in fitting it into one of its neighbours, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece. The intense difficulty preceding this link-up – which the English word *puzzle* indicates so well – not only loses its *raison d'être*, it seems never to have had any reason, so obvious does the solution appear. The two pieces so miraculously conjoined are henceforth one, which in its turn will be a source of error, hesitation, dismay, and expectation.

The role of the puzzle-maker is hard to define. In most cases – and in particular in all cardboard jigsaws – the puzzles are machine-made, and the lines of cutting are entirely arbitrary: a blanking die, set up once and for all, cuts the sheets of cardboard along identical

lines every time. But such jigsaws are eschewed by the true puzzle-lover, not just because they are made of cardboard instead of wood, nor because the solutions are printed on the boxes they come in, but because this type of cut destroys the specific nature of jigsaw puzzles. Contrary to a widely and firmly held belief, it does not really matter whether the initial image is easy (or something taken to be easy – a genre scene in the style of Vermeer, for example, or a colour photograph of an Austrian castle) or difficult (a Jackson Pollock, a Pissarro, or the poor paradox of a blank puzzle). It's not the subject of the picture, or the painter's technique, which makes a puzzle more or less difficult, but the greater or lesser subtlety of the way it has been cut; and an arbitrary cutting pattern will necessarily produce an arbitrary degree of difficulty, ranging from the extreme of easiness – for edge pieces, patches of light, well-defined objects, lines, transitions – to the tiresome awkwardness of all the other pieces (cloudless skies, sand, meadow, ploughed land, shaded areas, etc.).

Pieces in puzzles of this kind come in classes of which the best-known are

the little chaps
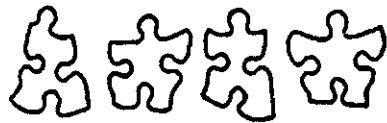
the double crosses
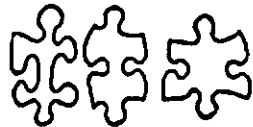
and the crossbars

and once the edges have been put together, the detail pieces put in place – the very light, almost whitish yellow fringe on the carpet on the table holding a lectern with an open book, the rich edging of the mirror, the lute, the woman's red dress – and the bulk of the background pieces parcelled out according to their shade of grey, brown, white, or sky blue, then solving the puzzle consists simply of trying all the plausible combinations one by one.

The art of jigsaw puzzling begins with wooden puzzles cut by

hand, whose maker undertakes to ask himself all the questions the player will have to solve, and, instead of allowing chance to cover his tracks, aims to replace it with cunning, trickery, and subterfuge. All the elements occurring in the image to be reassembled – this armchair covered in gold brocade, that three-pointed black hat with its rather ruined black plume, or that silver-braided bright yellow livery – serve by design as points of departure for trails that lead to false information. The organised, coherent, structured signifying space of the picture is cut up not only into inert, formless elements containing little information or signifying power, but also into falsified elements, carrying false information; two fragments of cornice made to fit each other perfectly when they belong in fact to two quite separate sections of the ceiling, the belt buckle of a uniform which turns out *in extremis* to be a metal clasp holding the chandelier, several almost identically cut pieces belonging, for one part, to a dwarf orange tree placed on a mantelpiece and, for the other part, to its scarcely attenuated reflection in a mirror, are classic examples of the types of traps puzzle-lovers come across.

From this, one can make a deduction which is quite certainly the ultimate truth of jigsaw puzzles: despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other.