To the EDITOR ALGOL 68
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[Copies to members of IFIP.WG.2.1]

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{Reader's reaction: "there are writings which are lovable although ungrammatical, and there are other writings which are extremely grammatical, but are disgusting. This is something that I cannot explain to superficial persons."

from the Epigram of Chang Ch'ao "On Flowers and Women" as quoted by Lin Yutang in "The Importance of Living".

Author's defence: "My tragic tale I won't prolong
sing rickety, tickety tin,
my tragic tale I won't prolong
and if you did not enjoy my song
you've yourselves to blame if it's too long:
you should never have let me begin....

from "The Irish ballad" by Tom Lehrer}

Dear Editor,

Thank you for sending me MR93, which has absorbed a considerable fraction of my available mental energy since it is in my possession. It must have been very hard work to compose it; alas, it also makes rather grim reading. The document turned out like I expected it to be, only much more so.

The more I see of it, the more unhappy I become. I know it is a hard thing to say to an author who has struggled for years, but the proper fate of this document may indeed range from being subjected to minor corrections to being completely rejected. If the latter is the most sensible thing to do, sending errata sheets and lots of people trying to understand what it is all about seems a sad waste of energy.

On account of the draft report my faith in WG.2.1 (at least in its present constitution) is very low. The draft report is thick and difficult, in fact too thick and too difficult to inspire much confidence. Is there any hope of weeding all errors from a work of such size and complexity? Is there any hope of a convincing demonstration that the proposal does not contain pitfalls anymore? And is then this manuscript, that the Computing Community has been waiting for? I am very sorry for you, but I am having a hard time if I try to believe all that.

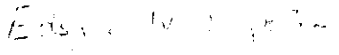
Size and complexity of the defining apparatus you needed terrify me. Being well-acquainted with your ingenuity I think it a safe assumption that ALGOL 68 as conceived can hardly be defined by significantly more concise and transparent

means. Having "Simplex Veri Sigillum" as one of my mottoes -particularly with respect to programming- I feel inclined to put the blame on the language you tried to define. If this is correct, WG.2.1 should return to its proper subject matter, viz. programming languages.

I don't know what is going to happen with MR93 in WG.2.1. I expect a strong political pressure to recommend it and can see many of the fake arguments seemingly supporting such a decision. (E.g. "So much has been put in it, that we cannot afford to reject it." or "It becomes absolutely necessary to produce a document and if we reject this, we are back where we were a couple of years ago." or "Who has anything better?". We can be sure that they will all turn up!) If MR93 turns out to be the dead alley I am now afraid it is, it will be more the fate of WG.2.1 that that of MR93 that will be at stake, viz. whether WG2.1 will make itself ridiculous by recommending it. It makes me very miserable.

For you I most sincerely hope that your tremendous efforts will prove to have been well-directed, but I am terribly afraid.....

Yours ever



Edsger W.Dijkstra