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## **WRITING THROUGH: GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI'S *THE BIG GLASS* AND THE IDEA OF INTERMEDIACY IN THE PROCESS OF REWRITING**

*Published in 1991, Gabriel Josipovici's novel The Big Glass reveals a multifarious fabric of rewriting. It first takes on an intertextual aspect since the text makes use of Marcel Duchamp's notes for his "Green Box" which accompanies his plastic work, the Large Glass. This first dimension brings to the foreground the notion of reiteration in two different ways. On the one hand, it is the idea of rewriting that comes into play for Duchamp's notes are reused and thus renewed by the novel. In this respect, Josipovici's fiction tackles rewriting as a dialectics of tension with the source of inspiration: a process of existing both on a par with and aloof from the hypotext, continuously hesitating between dependence and autonomy. On the other hand, the novel shows signs of intersemiotic transposition, drawing on Duchamp's work and imitating it with literary techniques. Both thematic intertextuality and formal intermediality contribute to the construction of a specific philosophy of time: the concept of "delay in glass" and the idea of chance are tokens of an intertextual as well as interartistic repetition. But then, the source of inspiration also serves as a prism through which the work of art comes into being. Staging prismatic patterns that Duchamp's work symbolizes permits to tinge the notion of rewriting in the novel with the idea of filtering or perceiving through. Hence repetition is that through which works of art are channelled. Indeed, the palimpsest seems to be akin to the delayed reception The Big Glass calls for. The protagonist of the novel, Goldberg, transcribes the notes of an artist, Harsnet. Repetition becomes as much a gesture of taking back as an act of redoing. From the very beginning Goldberg's scriptural activity hovers between reliable transcribing of a text and annotating, glossing, and interpreting it. The protagonist transcribes, but he also makes commentaries, and he even writes in a separate notebook, constructing yet another text. In this respect, rewriting becomes a practice consisting in writing through (filter, intermediacy) but also writing beside (Goldberg's notebook) or writing upon (margin, palimpsest). I wish to highlight this prismatic dynamics in Josipovici's novel by first examining the philosophy of time adumbrated with the help of the hypotext. Second, I focus on several degrees of repetition underlying the palimpsest activity, and ranging from the act of taking back (repossession) to the act of retouching or reconstructing (axiological level, hermeneutic level). Finally, I examine the idea of repetition as a stylistic device involving constant return, intermediacy or overlapping of narrative voices.*

**Key-words :** Josipovici – *The Big Glass* – Duchamp – *The Large Glass* – *The Green Box* – intermediacy – intertextuality – intermediality – prism/filter – palimpsest – temporality – narrative voices – repetition.

The American composer and writer, John Cage, selects words of other artists, and rewrites them in mesostics, making use of chance compositional techniques. The method bears the name of “writing-through,” and it consists in drawing on the words of a writer, or *writing with* a writer. It can be seen, for instance, in his “Sculpture Musicale,” a mesostic based on Marcel Duchamp’s words *sons durant et partant de différents points et formant une sculpture musicale*:

PointS et formant  
 musiCale  
 qUi  
 musicaLe  
 parTant de  
 mUsicale sons  
 sons duRant  
 sculpturE [...]¹

The visual arrangement of the words upon the page enables Cage to create a new text allowing for randomness. But it also permits to underline the original discourse that shows through as a string of letters in the middle.

The technique used by Cage exemplifies a high degree of borrowing: a work no personal or individual word is granted entry to. Only through the words of other writers can a text come into being. *Writing through* is thus *writing with*: with tradition, with the past, with otherness. Yet, some degree of personal impact *is* visible within the intertextual superimposition of discourses. And this idea of intermingling texts also characterizes rewriting, only to mention palimpsests where one text erases the other. Here *writing through* becomes *writing upon*. Cage selects Duchamp’s words and turns them into a mesostic with the help of a programme called “Mesolist”. The act of selection echoes the principle of the readymade as an object already there to be picked up and *met*². The act of creation abandons its original sense of a *technè*. On another level, the artistic act is handed over to a machine. The act of creation becomes directed randomness.

It is not only by the use of Duchamp’s words that Cage’s technique resembles Josipovici’s *The Big Glass*. It also has something in common in terms of technique: use of concepts of a work of art, superimposition of layers, borrowing, or repetition. Initially, I conceived of the idea of “writing-through” both as an intertextual transposition, or transference of texts or ideas, and as a filter or screen through which the original text must pass, but also upon which, so to speak, it deposits itself, sediments and shows. In other words, *writing-through* is a palimpsest activity because it is both *writing with* and *writing upon*.

*The Big Glass*, published in 1991, relates to Duchamp’s project of the *Large Glass* both as a source of textuality and as a means of exploring the palimpsest activity itself. *Writing through*, *writing upon*, or *writing aside* all boil down to creation within a mechanism of thresholds. Hence, I will first examine the way in which the plastic work is rewritten in the novel. Second, I will point to the ways in which the novel stages different degrees of gloss and interpretation. Finally, I will explore the concept of intermediacy through different degrees of transitions in the text in relation to the *Large Glass*.

¹ John Cage, “Sculpture Musicale.” Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage: Writer*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1993, pp.183-85.

² Following, to some extent, Duchamp’s idea of creation as a « rendezvous ».

## WITH AND WITHOUT: THE LARGE GLASS AS A MODEL

Time will assuage.  
Time's verses bury  
Margin and page  
In commentary...

J.V. Cunningham

The novel stages an artist, Harsnet, who begins a great project. The protagonist embodies Duchamp. The analogy is established from the beginning: the work on the glass is to be accompanied by notes to the work. Indeed, Duchamp takes notes for the *Large Glass* himself. His work is as plastic as it is literary. The condition of its becoming is thematically broached by Josipovici's novel. The fact of staging creation at one with annotation allows the artistic activity to be envisaged as *writing aside*. Although Duchamp's notes appear to be a preparation for – *writing toward* – the work, it already brings to light the act of decentralization of the work: something happens beyond the work, be it on its literal or metaphorical margins, or on the other side of it.

Josipovici draws not only on Duchamp's plastic work, but also on the circumstances of its becoming. As is often the case in his novels, the interartistic association is only partly so. The novel draws as much on the source of its inspiration as it withdraws from it. This is the case, for instance, with *Goldberg: Variations*<sup>3</sup> where the link with Bach's work is clearly affirmed thematically and structurally, but the story told is not the story of a musician's playing the *Goldbergs*, but the one of a writer trying his hand at alleviating another protagonist's insomnia. In its turn, *The Big Glass* is above all a novel interpretable in itself. Rewriting is hence only partly a *writing-with* activity. There is a screen through which the novel writes, and which does not let things through unchanged. It is then a residual act which only keeps traces of interartistic link.

Among such remainders of inspiration are the concepts and circumstances of the plastic work. Josipovici leaves Duchamp's ideas practically as they are. First, the conceptual domain relates to the physical aspect of the plastic work. Duchamp works on the *Large Glass* between 1915 and 1923 when he finally abandons it. Also known by its other title, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, the *Large Glass*, is composed of two panes of glass fixed on a frame of steel and wood. The *Large Glass* shows a glass surface presenting scattered elements such as the Chocolate Grinder or the Chariot. A mechanism of relationships is suggested between different parts of the work, but the separation between the two panes remains unbridgeable. Divided into two parts, the composition shows the Bride apparatus in the upper pane, and the machinery of Bachelors in the lower pane.

In Josipovici's *The Big Glass* the depiction of Duchamp's work is scattered throughout the novel appearing here and there in bits and pieces that the reader may decide to perceive as either parts of an imaginary work or in relation to the *Large Glass*. The precise dimensions of the work are given: "two biggish panels of glass, steel frame and stand, 227.5 x 175.8 cm. (109<sup>1/4</sup> x 69<sup>1/4</sup> inches)" (50). The different components are depicted early on: "Female suspended in non-space in top panel, he wrote. Bachelors strung together like pegs on a line on lower panel. They can never touch, he wrote, yet act upon each other from their separate worlds" (24).

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, *Goldberg: Variations*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002.

On the one hand, then, the world of the Bachelors – the lower panel – also called *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* or *Nine Malic Molds*<sup>4</sup>. The Bachelors are given specific names linked to different professions (gendarme, policeman, priest, busboy, stationmaster). The novel recalls these names: “the bachelors, he wrote. Policeman, judge, delivery boy, priest, referee, commissionaire. The uniform is the man” (28). Nine gas-filled Bachelors hang from the Capillary Tubes through which they propel their secretion that finds its way through to the Sieve. More precisely, the Capillary Tubes are issued from Duchamp’s *Réseau de stoppages* (1915) alluded to in the novel (“not stoppage and not flow but delay” (40)). Inside the Capillary Tubes the gas solidifies and turns into sequins, flowing up to the Sieve. There the sequins turn back into liquid and fall splashing, suggesting orgasm. The novel hints at the element of the Sieve: “Pleased with the way dust has settled on the sieves. The difficult calculations there beginning to pay off” (91). At the same time, the Chariot slides to and fro thanks to the Water Mill, propelled by the invisible Waterfall. The movement of the Chariot gives motion to the Scissors that open and close and that are linked to The Chocolate Grinder, placed on the pedestal table. Duchamp says the Bachelor must grind his chocolate on his own. Onanism is not only hinted at, but it is mentioned by Duchamp as well. On the right handside are the Oculist Witnesses standing for the spectator. Allusions to all these elements are scattered all through Josipovici’s novel:

The Bachelors. The Pulley. The Cooler. The Moulds. The Scissors. The Grinder. The gas. The Waterfall. The Mist. The Sieves. (41)

The Grinder grinds but no chocolate emerges, he wrote. Glider, he wrote, Mallic Moulds, Scissors, Sieves. (62)

The grinder, he wrote. The chariot and its onanistic litany, he wrote. (62)

Oculist charts at bottom right hand? He wrote. Not hole. Not magnifying glass, but oculist charts. (82)

On the other hand, there is the world of the Bride – the upper panel – also called *Motor-Desire*, *Wasp*, and *Hanged Female*<sup>5</sup>. She is made up of different interacting parts, akin to an engine or mechanism. The machinery runs on a substance Duchamp calls “automobile.” The Bride extends into a halo which ends in the Milky Way. She “blossoms, opens out, dilates with pleasure,”<sup>6</sup> as Octavio Paz points out in “The Castle of Purity,” examining the polysemous nature of Duchamp’s term “épanouissement.” According to Paz, the word suggests opening out, blooming, blowing, beaming, brightening up, expansion. The novel alludes to the Bride’s “flowering” (22), her stripping herself “glowing with pleasure at seeing herself being seen” (63). One of the components of the Bride is the Wasp. Consequently, the *Hanged Female* suggests the act of stinging and its secretion. The novel alludes to the image of a sting by means of a pun on the French word *dard*, meaning both “of art” and “sting” (“Ard Object, he wrote. Objet Dard. L’Entre Deux Verres, he wrote. Why do my titles come out better in French than in English?” (66)). Stinging also recalls Duchamp’s first draft of the project *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* (1912), where the stripping is tantamount to piercing, suggested by multiple darts or arrows converging to the bride. Piercing, stinging, and stabbing are also evoked by the area of dots below the Milky Way, corresponding to the Bachelors’ Nine Shots. By means of symbolic elements pointing to act and motion, the *Large Glass* deals

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Duchamp’s notes: *Cimetière d’uniformes et de liveries, Neuf moules mâlic*.

<sup>5</sup> *Guêpe, Pendu femelle*.

<sup>6</sup> Octavio Paz, “The Castle of Purity.” *Appearance Stripped Bare*. New York: Seaver Books, 1981, p.43.

with desire. The Bride's striptease is a mechanical, chemical, physical and spiritual stripping, as Paz states:

The bride is a desiring motor that desires herself. Her essence, both in the chemico-psychological and in the ontological meanings of the word, is desire. This essence, at one and the same time, a lubricant and her being, in itself. Her essence, her being, is desire, and this desire, which cannot be reduced to feelings although it originates in them, is but a desire for being.<sup>7</sup>

The paradoxes of a frustrated desire are also hinted at in the novel:

A story about our desire for more and the folly of that desire, the desire for more and the inevitable frustration of that desire. Desire of Bride to be more than a bride, to be a mother too. Desire of Bachelors to be more than bachelors, to be husbands and fathers too. (69)

But then, the novel not only depicts the machinery of the glass, but, with its help, it builds up its own philosophical reflection on art and creation.

Indeed, some of Duchamp's concepts contribute to the critical or philosophical reflection on art in *The Big Glass*. Broaching the question of a work's becoming – the circumstances of its creation – the novel questions art on the whole. The process of becoming is linked to Duchamp's work, either because it revolves around the act of creating or because it refers to the evolution of the creator's concepts. *The Big Glass* is thus a novel about art and artists above all. It goes back over the process of coming to grips with a work of art through time. It traces a span of an artist's life. It is in this respect that Josipovici's novel is both close to and independent from Duchamp's work, enabling the reader to approach it on a more abstract level. Hence, the *Large Glass* seems to be only a springboard for a broader apprehension of art in *The Big Glass*.

Since it is impossible to give a comprehensive account of all remarks on the circumstances of creation within the novel, I will roughly point to two categories: the artist as a body and the artist as a critic.

One thing the novel focuses on is the artist's physical relationship to his work. The body as an obstacle appears early on:

A project is a project, he wrote, and once it is begun it should be carried through to the end, regardless of doubts about meaning, doubts about long runs, or doubts about anything else, unless the body screams for you to stop, of course one cannot go on for long against the screaming of the body. (18)

It would seem that the progression of the work lives on what the artist vests in it. The more the glass progresses, the less there is left of the artist himself. Somehow, the work perverts and impairs its author, or at least transforms him ("But rather [that] the time and thought put into it had somehow polluted me." (78)). Consequently, the physical intake the artist breathes into the work winds up affecting him, and he even goes to the doctor's ("Any idea that the bout of despair was over was quickly dispelled as the old horror came over me again in waves. Dragged myself to the doctor" (80)). The image of bodily separation only enhances the idea of physical impact ("Joy as sheet of old newspaper whirled across the road and wrapped itself round my leg. I looked down. It was my leg all right, but somehow detached from me" (94)). At this stage the work verges on achievement. A leg detaches itself. The artist begins to walk out on the work.

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<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.51.

Of course, the idea of a work having a hold on the artist is as bodily a matter as it is a psychological one. In this respect, it morally affects him, but it also allows him to bring forward a number of precepts about art. The movement, the gestures, and the touch the creator must resort to all belong to the physical domain:

Simply the sense of physical disgust which filled me whenever I took up a brush and dipped it in paint. So strong that merely stopping was no solution. Desire to make, he wrote, but physical revulsion at the falsity of all making. (29)

But they also partake of the author's philosophy of art, in such a way that the above excerpt also contributes towards the underlying thought of art in the novel on the whole. Does it still make sense to go on creating? Is art still a *technè*, in other words, is creating still creating? Must a particular work of art build on tradition or should it stand out? All these questions are implicitly tackled in the novel, recalling Duchamp's questionings.

Rising against traditional views of art is what comes to the foreground. On the one hand, the work as procreation and natural outgrowth is rejected ("The absurd idea, he wrote, that a work of art grows from nothing into something, from acorn into oak" (31)). The work does not genuinely spring from a creative act as a *technè*. It does not have to be preceded by a period of pregnancy since "human artefacts are not children" (62), as the novel says. And since the glass is but an "onanistic litany" (62), since the Bride is never to be "impregnated," the work becomes an "icon of aridity" (70), "last work of art and first work of non-art" (70), "the end of art" (33). Such a refusal of organic development recalls Duchamp's considering the work as a rendezvous, an act of indifferent selection rather than creation.

Among the iconoclastic precepts, there is the revolt against the institutionalized reception of art that goes together with its popularization:

Nothing but running around and organizing, he wrote. When the history of our times comes to be written, They Organized Themselves to Death will be the only possible epitaph. No doubt they mean well when the arts are concerned, he wrote, but for that reason they are the biggest menace. [...] no doubt they see themselves as devoted middlewomen bringing the truly important work of the time to the avid masses, but all they are really doing, wrote Harsnet (typed Goldberg) is fucking up the lives of both sets of people. They bring time into what is essentially timeless. (92)

Art must free itself from the bounds of the ossified reception ("true art as a release from Art, he wrote. The glass as freedom, not constraint" (93)). It should stand by itself – its reception also taking after the idea of *rendezvous* – and be different, or simply itself ("any new work worth its salt should be essentially different from all that has gone before, all that others have done and all that you have done (21)). Finally, understanding, interpreting, or just receiving a work is always an act that *overflows* ("Whatever the project, however trivial, however exalted, it will always say more than its maker knows" (19)). The sentence recalls Duchamp's insisting on the role of the spectator.

Consequently, alongside the material borrowings from Duchamp's work, appearing in the novel in the form of fragmentary descriptions of different components of the *Large Glass*, there emerges a philosophical questioning of art, also tinged with Duchamp's own ideas. A dialogic dynamics is established between the novel, the plastic work, and the speculation that goes with it. The references to the material aspect of the composition already weld the text to its plastic source of inspiration. The fictional background to the circumstances of creation and reception –

the body of the artist, his thoughts, his relationship to the public, to tradition, to institution – only highlight this dialogic nature of the novel.

But then, from the very start, such an interartistic rewriting brings about an enigmatic dimension if it is to be considered in itself. Since Josipovici's art-inspired works operate through both association and dissociation, ever akin to and aloof from their *hypotexts*, it seems possible for the reader to read the novel either as it stands or through its intertextual prism. Indeed, a note warns the reader:

This is not a fictionalized biography of Marcel Duchamp. Nevertheless, it could obviously not have been written without the existence of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, his notes to the glass known as the Green Box, and the scattering of other writings and interviews by him. (6)

It is largely due to such a duality between independence and lack of autonomy that the novel calls for a particular hermeneutic gesture, triggering a constant motion between Duchamp's creative work and itself, since it requires a specific knowledge from the reader. Yet, it also calls for an autonomous reading. Reading *with*, reading *without*.

## **UPON AND ASIDE: THE WORK AS A METAPHOR OF PALIMPSEST**

...For gloss demands  
A gloss annexed  
Till busy hands  
Blot out the text...

With regards to this duality, the novel is predicated on the paradigm of intermediacy. Reading takes on a Janus face, constantly situated at a midline between the *hypotext* and *hypertext*, torn apart between remaining within the text and turning away from it. Such an oscillation sparks off a specific time condition that, following Eco<sup>8</sup>, one could term *intertextual time*. Eco speaks about the time implied by quotations. The act of interpreting intertextual references brings about an encyclopaedic attitude and a particular temporality. It does not necessarily mean that reading such texts takes time, but rather that the reader's skimming through his or her own frames of reference is already a specifically temporal activity. Cross-references on the margin, for instance, as in ancient glossing techniques, kindle a particular temporality both from those who establish and those who decipher them.

Consequently, *writing upon* or *writing aside* leads to a specific hermeneutic approach. In *The Big Glass*, interpretation, reading, and annotating are all staged as part and parcel of the novel's subject matter, and it can be said that if the book is about art and the creative process, it is also about interpreting art, reading texts, and making them one's own. Indeed, one of the protagonists, Goldberg, is in charge of transcribing the notes written by the artist, Harsnet<sup>9</sup>. The notes are meant to accompany the work of art they deal with. Goldberg's task is that of a professional scrivener who is supposed to perform but a manual work, as amanuenses or scribes do. He thus writes *for* someone.

The condition of the character as a modern scribe is established from the very beginning:

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<sup>8</sup> Umberto Eco, « Le Temps dans l'art. » Michel Baudson, ed. *L'Art et le temps: Regards sur la quatrième dimension*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that, when anagrammatically reshuffled, the name Harsnet should comprise "he" and "trans".



I began work on the big glass on 27 July 1967, wrote Harsnet. Goldberg, images of their last meeting in the narrow entrance of the elegant little Scottish National gallery of Modern Art dancing in his head, slipped a sheet of A4 into his old Olivetti portable and started to transcribe. I began work on the big glass on 27 July 1967, he typed. (9)

What the text brings to the foreground here is that, in spite of its being a mechanical activity that consists in repeating a text verbatim, the transcription is above all a personal approach to the text. The very incipit portrays Goldberg in the act of remembrance. However automatic it may be, transcription is reading, and reading is reception which cannot avoid interpretation.

Accordingly, Goldberg, as a scrivener, gradually oversteps the boundaries of the simple transposing of signs from one source to the other, and switches from transcription to exegesis. First, the novel highlights the gap between the author and the scribe. It is written in the third person, and keeps on driving a wedge between both characters, so that the duplicity of the text never wanes. Here and there, it magnifies the fact that the text we are reading is being copied by saturating the levels of enunciation with repetition:

Diana, he wrote (and Goldberg typed). Melampus. Ichnobates. Pamphagus. The wooded vale. The spring. The cave. Right hand side still too empty, he wrote. The mechanical Diana, he wrote. Difficulty of devising a structure that will stand firm yet will not be over-heavy, he wrote. (28)

The text thus prevents the levels from overlapping, carefully delimiting the boundaries between the characters. It also does so through other devices. It hatches a system of links or bridges between both sources of enunciation, based on bringing the sentence to its minimum:

How she is in love with flesh and conveys that love to us. Bah! So Harsnet. And Goldberg, in his pad: I have never said or written any of the sentiments attributed to me here, though I have heard them from the mouths and read them from the pens of others. (46)

Such spaces of intermediacy between the characters are quite a few. The ellipsis, or the necessity of abridging the mediating text, may remind one of ancient scribes' techniques of shorthand transcription such as tachygraphy. In this respect, the embedding text has something of the nature of a script. It imitates the circumstances of transcription. It also does so by way of abrupt breaking off of the sentence:

I am not talking primarily about myself, he wrote, for it will be obvious to anyone who reads these notes that you have used me simply as a stalking horse for some of your more outrageous views and. Dear Harsnet, he wrote, tearing the sheet in his hurry to turn over the page, I know you never reply to letters and refuse to answer the door or the phone. (60)

Aposiopesis helps represent the material aspect of writing. These devices appear to be more and more necessary as the nature of Goldberg's activity changes.

Indeed, Goldberg's transcription comes to be increasingly intrusive or simply more absorbing. Alongside his transcription, he comes to annotate the text. Accordingly, two different categories of his activity can be distinguished: notes and marginalia. The character *writes aside* and *writes upon*, gradually becoming a writer in his turn:

To begin at the right time, he wrote, means to be done with excuses once and for all. *Excuses*, wrote Goldberg in the margin of his typescript with a felt-tip pen, *an end to excuses*. There has

to be a time, wrote Harsnet, and Goldberg, laying down the pen, began to type again, there has to be a time when excuses are no longer necessary [...]. (10)

And Goldberg pushing the typewriter to one side, seized his pen and pad and wrote: Jake. What happened was this. Harsnet was due to get married. The date was fixed I was the best man. [...] He pushed the pad aside, drew the typewriter towards him and began to type again, squinting down at his friend's tiny handwriting. (29-30)

In both excerpts the character resorts to a separate activity, on a par with gloss or palimpsest. The material condition of writing is minutely portrayed: writing with a felt-tip pen, pushing the text aside, and pulling it back again. At first, the margin notes, italicised in the novel, seem to tally with the act of underlining and summarizing the text. Goldberg turns Harsnet's sentence – "to be done with excuses once and for all" – into condensed key-words: "excuses," "an end to excuses." This implies repeating. But here comes the major difference between two kinds of repetition as rewriting. On the one hand, there is the necessity of reduplicating for the sake of emphasis (italics). On the other, there is repeating as a token of intermediacy that the repetition of *there has to be a time* serves for in this very excerpt. Goldberg's marginalia echo medieval gloss. The words emphasized by italics resemble the *lemmata* or the keywords of ancient commentaries that used to be underlined. In *The Big Glass* there also appear underlined passages, but this type of stress seems to be more ambivalent. It suggests the act of annotating, but it does not seem to be necessarily associated with Goldberg. Underlined passages appear from the very beginning: "that is why I have cleared the decks and prepared the ground, because unless the decks are cleared and the ground prepared there is little hope of succeeding in what one has planned to do" (9). It would seem that underlining also functions as keywords extraction ("fluidity," "meticulousness" (13)). But what it also emphasizes is repetition itself. Because of its metatextual rather than paratextual dimension, the underlined passages may be attributed to the artist or the third person narrator rather than to the scribe. Because underlining echoes Duchamp's manuscripts, teeming with all sorts of emphases, it is more probable that this activity should belong to Harsnet.

As to the typology of Goldberg's margin notes, different degrees of *writing upon* can be pointed out. First, there is the annotating as a synthetic activity, implying summary and reformulation: "never to imagine that what we do is ever going to be an everlasting achievement. *Outlet*, scribbled Goldberg in the margin, *folly of belief in permanence*" (16). Second, the necessity of shorthand transcription is suggested through abbreviation: "The big glass as icon of aridity, he wrote, and Goldberg, in the margin, *BG icon of aridity*" (70). Then, there is also axiological commentary: "Goldberg in the margin: *Compendium of old themes*" (65). Goldberg also questions the text: "(and Goldberg, pausing in his typing, picked up his pen and put a small question mark in the margin of his typescript and the carried on)" (24). The character propounds his own analysis: "So Harsnet. And Goldberg in the margin: *Despair. Self-hatred*" (79). Or he expounds the text through personal explanation:

And Goldberg in the margin: *for the whole of the time I knew him he had, stuck on his studio wall, a reproduction of Picasso's amazing 1943 painting of the mother teaching her child to walk. That's not what life is all about, he would say, pointing to it, it's what art's all about too.* (91)

All the different traits of Goldberg's marginalia boil down to one conclusion: the scribe cannot transcribe indifferently, or disregard the text, and his reading becomes writing.

This transformation from the scrivener to the reader, and then to the writer is even more obvious in Goldberg's pad notes. Indeed, *writing aside* comes to be freer and bolder in that it allows for the notions of correction and substitution. Although it does not encroach upon Harsnet's text materially, it becomes a potential or mirror palimpsest to it. First, the pad notes aim at correcting the manuscript. Goldberg gives his own version of events, thus partly (virtually) erasing the original: "And Goldberg pushing the typewriter to one side, seized his pen and pad and wrote: Jake. What happened was this. Harsnet was due to get married..." (29). It also deals with looking up references: "He pulled the notebook towards him and wrote: Check early drypoint, *Heroin for a Penny*, refs. Penelope." Gradually, Goldberg becomes a writer himself, and communication builds up between him and the potential readers of his gloss ("And Goldberg in his pad: N.B. his almost pathological need to denigrate critics and criticism" (51)), but also with Harsnet. Indeed, Goldberg addresses himself to Harsnet:

And Goldberg, pulling the pad towards him and seizing his felt-tip pen, began to write. Dear Harsnet, you may keep your door closed and not answer when I ring the bell, you may refuse to answer my letters or return my calls when I leave a message on your answering machine, but sooner or later we are bound to meet and this time I will not let you fob me off with a smile [...]. If I am to do what you asked, he wrote, you will have to co-operate. We will have to meet and discuss some of the problems. (32)

Symbolically, reading is no longer rewriting alone, but it becomes communicating as well. Goldberg's notes hover between the status of commentary and that of real exchange so that both characters take turns narrating. Some elements concerning Goldberg may be found in Harsnet's text and *vice versa*. Their communication blurs the text's status as transcription. The ambiguity of the annotation clearly appears in the novel:

Write up? wrote Goldberg. Appendix. Or note at foot of page? (30)

Goldberg, pushing the hair out of his eyes with his forearm, dragged the pad towards him and wrote: Appendix on the real facts? Or let him damn himself with his own words? (43)

The text seems to lack autonomy, and the whole apparatus of gloss must unfold.

Hence, the novel shows different degrees of commentary in progress. The scrivener who becomes a reader cannot help becoming a commentator and writer in his turn. A typology of his commentaries may be outlined, ranging from simple emphasis to questions, interpretation, and modification of the text. Emphasis, annotation, and substitution echo the ancient transcription, gloss and palimpsest. But they refer to Duchamp's notes themselves in many a way. First, Duchamp's notes present us with a multifarious system of annotation signs. Second, his notes underwent a parallel transformation through multiple reproductions. Finally, among the multiple exegeses of the *Large Glass* – symbolical, religious, psychoanalytical, and many others – it has been seen as a work about criticism itself. On the one hand, because the *Large Glass* is itself aided and abetted by a system of notes, which gives it a literary character. On the other, because it symbolizes criticism. Then, *The Big Glass* is a novel about the critical activity as such. "The big glass and the notes for the big glass" (21), says the novel. "This painting is a text" (29), says Paz. The intertextual time it abides by is that of circularity triggered by mirroring. The reader of the novel is confronted with his or her own reflection: a mirror of the inexhaustible need to *write upon*, *writing aside*.

## **THROUGH AND ACROSS: THRESHOLDS, TRANSITIONS, AND THE “INFINITELY SLIM”**

...Search in this gloss  
No text inherent:  
The text was lost.  
The gain is gloss...

The mirroring effect between the two characters establishes the notion of a slim border as a space of intermediacy. Beside the devices I have already mentioned, one could simply point to the blurring of the boundaries between Goldberg and Harsnet owing to repetition, suggestive of a degree of overlapping. Reiteration may be a clue of transition, but it may also annihilate the possibility of separation:

For there is nothing worse, he wrote, than beginning too soon. It is much worse to begin too soon, he wrote, than not to begin at all. Much worse to begin too soon than to begin too late. Much worse to begin too soon and realize one has begun too soon than to begin too late and realize one has begun too late. Much worse to begin too soon and realize one is inadequately prepared than to begin too late and realize one is over-prepared. Much worse to begin too soon and reach the end too quickly, typed Goldberg, squinting at the manuscript before him, than to begin at the right time and reach the end too quickly. Much worse to begin too soon and feel one has begun too soon than to begin at the right time and discover one has nothing to begin. (9)

The repetition here pertains mostly to paraphrasing and expanding on the sentence. The text shifts from the writer to the scribe. One may wonder whether the sentence the latter transcribes is not a paraphrase itself. In any event, the excerpt hovers between repetition as reformulation and repetition as shift. What it highlights is the device of transition that the whole text relies on. Whereas the idea of intermediacy characterizes the process of transcribing, it leads, on a more general level, to the representation of thresholds and borders. It is both a spatial and temporal process. The incipit already lays emphasis on transition and time. Here the two characters are spatially and temporally separate, yet they jumble together and dovetail within one narrative. As Goldberg comes to take on an increasingly critical stance, a dialogue is established between them, and the distance is reduced. The exchange even materializes: Harsnet receives letters from Goldberg and the characters wind up meeting. Time and space seem to be narrowing: if Goldberg transcribes from a certain time distance (“staring at his friend’s manuscript all those years later” (26)), he suddenly seems closer and closer (“Yesterday he rang the bell for a long time” (102)). The encounter between the text and its reader and scribe does not abide by rational laws (“Time flashing by like a dream since I first showed it to Goldberg” (109)). There seems to be a point of junction which enables one to pass through an infinitely slim threshold.

The concept of transition and intermediacy is contained in Duchamp’s work itself. Transparent and opaque at the same time, the *Large Glass* incarnates the idea of passage. It is not only to be looked *at*, but also to be looked *through*. The novel takes after its plastic model in terms of *writing through*, both as rewriting and as a space of multi-faceted transitions. Duchamp propounds the notion of the “infinitely slim” (*l’inframince*) in his notes. The infinitely slim appears as a space of all possible thresholds. It may be spatial and visual as in contemplating the other side of a

surface<sup>10</sup>. It may imply time as in the case of passengers jumping on the train just before the door shuts close<sup>11</sup>. It may also reveal the reciprocity of side by side objects polluting one another<sup>12</sup>. At any rate, it is a moment of breaking through to the other side.

On the one hand, this idea is evoked in the novel in terms of a general metamorphosis. The big glass itself goes through three stages: "First the glass, he wrote, and then the show and finally the end" (23). The text follows suit, relating the progressive becoming of a work: production, exhibition, and an end. Creation then is governed by thresholds. But then, the very beginning is itself a moment of the *infinitely slim*, hesitating between belatedness and anticipation. At the end, the glass is broken. Instead of its being an end, it only begins ("Only by being shattered could the glass come alive" (117)). It undergoes a series of stages, passing from nothing to something, and finally to something else. The *infinite slimness* may be compared to the sun breaking through a cloud (26). It may be likened to a metaleptic breakthrough ("Where is the threshold? He wrote. Are we inside already? Or forever outside?" (69)). It is at one with "rites of passage" and transfigurations: "The passage from the Virgin to the Bride, a kind of death, he wrote, as is the passage from bachelor to husband" (69). Finally, it is also reflected in mythical characters of Diana, Actaeon or Narcissus, and incarnated in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

But beside all theses configurations of thresholds, the glass is above all a temporal-visual phenomenon implying a specific contemplation:

What will the viewer see? He wrote. Something on the glass and the glass. And something through the glass. The wall of the gallery, the other exhibits hanging on it. People moving, standing, leaning forward. And his reflection. Himself bending forward and looking. Looking at. Looking through. Looking back at himself looking. (22)

One of the first notes of the *Green Box* is Duchamp's intention to paint "delay in glass". Delay is what stems from circularity, predicated on the specificity of looking at a translucent pane. It is first an experience of reaching through to another dimension. Duchamp's research on passing through to the fourth dimension is alluded to in the novel. *The Big Glass* also hints at *Alice Through the Looking Glass*: "the Big Glass as Cheshire Cat" (37). But it tackles voyeurism above all: "Keyhole to peep through?" (36). Not only is this "magic peep-hole" suggestive of the mechanism of looking through in the *Large Glass* where one can freely observe the spectators on the other side, but it echoes another work by Duchamp, his *Étant donnés* (1946-66) as a peep-show. This voyeurism has something solipsistic about it: it smacks of the Bride's desiring desire, looking at herself being desired, or of the Bachelors failing to fecundate the Bride. A voyeuristic spectator seems safe under the cover of the glass, but he may well be caught red-handed ("Here Prospero discovers Ferdinand and Miranda playing at chess" (36)). The glass permits at once to look through, to be caught in the act of looking, and to look at oneself looking. The *infinitely slim* leads to "delay in glass" in the form of circularity: the work turns back on the spectator.

The novel – through the system of transcription and "freewheeling commentary" – is a space of transparency, voyeurism, and solipsistic activity. Reading is *reading* or *writing through*, a "window onto room behind" (26). It is also

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Duchamp's notes on *Inframince*: "Peinture sur verre vue du côté non peint donne un *inframince*," p.24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, "Portillons de métro. – Les gens qui passent au tout dernier moment/ *inframince*," p.22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, "Quand la fumée de tabac sent aussi de la bouche qui l'exhale, les 2 odeurs s'épousent par *inframince* (*inframince* olfactif)," p.24.

reading oneself. It reminds one of Proust's idea of the work as an optical instrument for the reader to peep through and back at himself that Josipovici quotes in his critical work, *The World and the Book*<sup>13</sup>. "Not look at but look with" (49), says *The Big Glass*. The work is a lens to see through. There is something in it that resembles the magnifying glass. Something as well of Duchamp's fascination for stereoscopic vision ("Not hole to see through but glass to alter vision?" (76)).

But then, the glass and the novel allow for an ambiguous reception. First, the glass *is* and *is not* transparent. Nothing holds onto the surface, nothing catches on to it. There is no trace of the spectator, no trace of the reader. And since the glass also becomes a metaphor of memory – "the glass was my mind [...] or my mind the glass" (39) – it lets things through, refusing to withhold them ("the elements of experience failed to catch on to the glass of our lives" (39)). Lack of trace leads to lack of memory and history. The reader reads through without a trace as though all were to fall into abeyance. Nothingness on the glass collides with the traditional canvas: the surface resists covering. A short story of Josipovici's is called precisely "The Death of Images". The author imagines the end of the image and quotes himself in *The Big Glass*. The short story is at one with Duchamp's shattering of the myth of wholeness and meaning to pieces. *The Big Glass* states that without images it would not even be possible to talk about the death of images, since language is largely dependent on them (58). It is then meaning in literature that is thus questioned:

The principle always that nothing should be hidden: There is only this. And yet that only should be able to stimulate dreams, create anxiety. [...] Is this all there is? Why no more? Why this? Why here? He wrote. Such questions should occur to the viewer, he wrote. And force him to ask the same questions of his life, and to reply: This is all there is and it is enough. Enough not because we must content ourselves with the minimum, he wrote, but because there is never more, if more means meaning, wholeness, salvation, redemption all the rest. (68)

It is the anxiety of meaninglessness shown through the transparency stripped bare: the death of images.

But it is also the death of causality: "So I have chosen to make an image of the failure of cause to relate to effect" (57). No natural link between any two elements is valid. Both the glass and the novel give precedence to randomness. It echoes Duchamp's experiments with chance. The Grinder is obtained by letting dust gather on a surface and fixing it afterwards ("élevage de poussière"). The dots in the upper part of the glass are made by nine shots. The final blow of fate comes with the glass being shattered, but it is accepted as part of the work. All these elements are alluded to in the novel, which speaks of "choice and chance" (40), "directed arbitrary" or "selectivity so planned as to celebrate randomness" (64-5). *The Big Glass* also mentions stochastic processes in art. One of the key figures of randomness is Xenakis who makes use of chance in his compositions. Just as Harsnet's notes follow each other at random (46), causality and teleology are abolished. The "duck-rabbit" effect, or Wilson-Lincoln effect, only illustrate the ambiguous nature of the work and the text.

Consequently, *reading* or *writing through* implies, for the reader, not only to see through something, but also to go through a series of thresholds. The glass is the "mirror of delay" where time seems palpable at the very moment of transition. The shift reveals the infinitely slim. The novel mirrors the mirror of delay by a mechanism of filters. The circularity of the gaze abolishes causality and teleology, admitting a degree of randomness. The image seems to be dead. Nothing deposits itself upon

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971, p.24.

the surface. Yet something there is that makes the viewer stumble. Time thickens within the slimmess of transition as the work is exposed to the spectator:

Time does not exist in the big glass, he wrote. Only exposure will provide it. Exposure to viewer. If only there was a way for each viewer to leave his mark. Each eye that looks to wear away the glass a little bit. My dream of a book whose print fades a little each time it is read until the pages are blank. (56)

The palimpsest materializes: the book is ready to be rewritten, anew.

To conclude, we have seen three modalities of rewriting in *The Big Glass*. First, in the sense of interartistic transposition, the dichotomy of independence and autonomy brings about a specific dynamics of reading, hovering between reading *with* and *without* the intersemiotic context. Second, the novel builds up a system of commentaries, recalling the tradition of scribes, scripts and palimpsests. Here *writing upon* and *writing aside* appear as two inextricably intertwined faces of the same activity of reception, inseparable from an active, dialogic and self-invested dynamics. Finally, the clockwork of filters and prisms contributes to a circular itinerary composed of thresholds and tinged with ambiguity. *The Big Glass* and the *Large Glass* appear as criticism itself, withholding, within the infinitely slim delay in glass, the image of the beholder.

If Cage's mesostics cast a light on the idea of "writing-through" as an intertextual practice of literal borrowing, his musical work, 4'33", reveals another aspect of it: it plunges the listeners into a four-minute stark silence, inciting them to listen *through* themselves first and foremost.

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