Review article

Invisible, Ink.: Classics, Programmers, and the Reprogramming of Cultural History in the Aftermath of the "Book Crisis"

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Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 2010. ISBN-13: 978-0226-66061-5 (cloth).

Sussman, Henry. *Around the Book: Systems and Literacy*. New York: Fordham UP, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8232-3283-3 (paper).

> Une proposition qui émane de moi—si, diversement, citée à mon éloge ou par blâme—je la revendique avec celles qui se presseront ici—sommaire veut, que tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre. (Variously used to praise or attack its author, a sentence whose source I am—and which I shall assume here along with others like it—says, in brief, that everything in the world exists to end up as a book.)[1]
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> —Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le livre, instrument spirituel" (The Book: A Spiritual Instrument)

> The best books are those that have set out the most inviting welcome mats to the ghosts and specters of thinking, reworking, and revision that can abide within their invariably provisional architecture. We have our hands on these books; they have trained the glare of their lifeless eyes on us. They will never go away.
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> —Henry Sussman, *Around the Book: Systems and Literacy*

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No matter what we are, techno-skeptics or intermedia buffs, mystics or rationalists, localists by circumstance or cosmopolitans by vocation, sooner or later we will have to come to grips with the seemingly paradoxical, "future anterior" condition of digitality with respect to analog discourse, traditional textuality, and, in particular, literature. Put differently, but so as to account for the previous sentence's quotation marks, the digital will in all likelihood take center stage as an *inscription system that will have come about*—for, in a way, it already has—qua textual history, more to the point, as a loose platform of projections and formal protocols worked out by text authors and other literary history participants. If we think that the advent of a worldwide digital culture not necessarily uniform or uniformly shared but one of potentially limitless and ultimately empowering sharing is "in the cards," a presence alluringly ahead of us, we should probably think again and, more specifically, about the historical literality of the phrase, that is, about the "programming" and pre-scriptions of this presence in the "cards," books, texts, inscriptions, and overall script of earlier, less densely webbed modernity. Needless to say, the hi-tech planetary onset of geo-communicational integration may occur in a glamorous future still to come, as techno-enthusiasts keep reassuring us. But, in a fashion that has to do with the imaginative programming of that future, this epoch-making event has abundantly marked our Gutenberg past's textual imaginary if not, or not equally, also that past's material domain of socio-geographic distribution. And I am not talking about "anticipation literature" either (as science fiction is known outside North America), be it of the Jules Verne variety or of the more allusively postmodern, playfully proto-informational sort for which William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's "neo-Victorian" *Difference Engine* remains an unsurpassed exemplar. More plainly, what I mean to underscore here is this: in pondering the minutia of writing and textual maneuverings, in mulling over books and their dissemination, and in dreaming the Plotinian-Borgesian dream of Bibliotheca Universalis, pre-Internet era writers have laid the groundwork for setting up our computationally constituted networks and, more broadly, for the new millennium's digitally "worlded" culture. A history of ideas still in search of its author may some day reveal that the digital has been lying *in nuce*, and oftentimes down to the most surprising details, in the modernists' textual and intertextual musings and practices—in what the French call "l'imagination livresque."

If the bookish imagination has indeed paved the road to the late-global techno-cultural imaginary underpinning the "network society" as a whole, then it becomes possible to envision what this intellectual history might look like in the rear-view mirror of the digital present. For starters, such a recapitulative modality—let us name it "genealogical"—would turn to digitality and its problematics, vocabularies, and so forth as to an epistemological grid through which one could scan modernity as an incubation period—or, more optimistically, infancy—of a *hic et nunc* shaped by Facebook, eHarmony and similar virtual dating sites, chat rooms, GoToMeeting-styled web conferencing, and other interconnectedness venues and instruments inside and outside cyberspace. Should we go down this re-evaluative path, moder-

nity's great writers, the book culture they founded, and the values germane to this culture would no longer come off as throwbacks to an obsolete age, but as visionaries and harbingers of the growingly hyperlinked, post-1989 moment. This moment—the "contemporary"—could then be construed both as a watershed in modern history, for it definitely is one, and as an intersection where previous concepts, anticipations, and intimations at long last "run across" their apposite techno-material embodiments, their "media." In a still more provocative interpretation, these media, complete with their hardware, would designate less the vehicle of a radical paradigm shift and more the coming into fruition of thought processes already there, sometimes merely allegorized and encrypted and sometimes quite explicitly fleshed out in the textual imagination—in the software-before-software—philosophers, writers, and book devotees "developed" by pre- or even non-technological means.

Of course, literary and book history could be reread in hindsight as—one might say, "downgraded" to—a humbler prehistory of the digital, a preparatory and unsophisticated episode to be entirely left behind by a modernity that would eventually identify modernization with digitalization. However, more heartening and scholarly sound would be, as far as I am concerned, an alternate hypothesis, which would seize on the digital now—let alone the geopolitically, socioeconomically, and informatically integrated future—as a bookish *Aufhebung*, a "sublation" of the livresque where book culture's posthumousness and this culture's new lease on life would become quite indistinguishable. In this vein ("spectral," as Derrida might see it), the digital would emerge as another installment in a venerable, ongoing narrative of perhaps less spectacular but steady progress. Here, the book and textuality largely would not become passé after the html turn. To the contrary, they would morph fully into that which they have articulated intuitively—"poetically" (and *poietically* too, as textual *poiesis*)—via low-tech and non-systematic media and figures centered around the book since Flaubert, Mallarmé, and the mid-late-19th century symbolist insurgence, if not since the Gutenberg Bible, or even earlier, with the formation of the biblical corpus itself and the hermeneutic-Kabbalistic tradition running from it and, generation after generation, through T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon, Harold Bloom, Mark Danielewski, Marisha Pessl, and their peers. In brief, one could wield the WWW, research engines, databases, along with the cultural-economic structures and flows enabled by them as epistemological-narrative tools for a forward-looking rewriting of literary history; one could turn to the book as a master descriptive matrix for remapping digital developments that would thus register as avatars of time-honored textual representations, tropes, and manipulations.

Revisiting literary and especially book history as an ever-reiterated "disappearing act," Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* and Henry Sussman's *Around the Book: Systems and Literacy* go a long way toward trying out this possibility (1). Afforded by the book's future anterior temporality, disappearance entails a "dialectical" reappearance, a cultural *mise-en-scène* in which the ebb and the flow are two faces of the same coin. On one, we contemplate

the decline of book culture and its practices, the depreciation of the book as major asset and hard currency of our cultural capital, a downward spiral that, some worry, will lead to outright extinction. On the other, and at the same time, we witness the literary-philosophical bringing into being of digitality and its corollary, the thickly networked world society. As the Janus-faced book arises and goes on to carve out culture, discourse, thinking, and with them the human itself across ages from papyrus scroll to Kmart paperback, it also "informs of, even illustrates," notices Sussman, "its immanent outmoding" (1).

This is not a typo. The critic does mean "immanent," not "imminent." Book writers have consistently and feverishly fancied semiotic systems conceivably vaster and more effective than the typographic constellations of the Gutenberg galaxy available to them, which is why those structures and communication types begin with and in books. It is in book mode and not in blogs that classical textuality owns up first to its "outmoding" fantasy, a death wish of sorts couched in the poor man's transcendentalism of dot-com rhetoric. It is in the book which is no more than that—a book—that the physical object starts "transvaluing" itself by way of self-inflicted reveries about a less material future of ubiquitous and presumably "fair" access, when the thing "as we know it" will be nothing more than an e-book directly, democratically, and simultaneously available ("to you") in all its e-ditions on the invisible shelves of perpetually stocked e-libraries. This may sound like a future that is not one, for the book at least, and yet the litterateurs and philosophers Sussman calls on do make provisions for it. Their works come out, "appear," and, in that, their presence stake out a present; at the same time, these texts forecast a disappearance, announce and even set in train (program) their demise as they gesture toward other systems of information recording and transmission.

Will such systems supersede their textual instrument, venue, and prototype one day? Nobody is a prophet in his or her land (to say nothing of cyberspace), so I will only second the critic on this score and offer that what happened to clay tablets and vellum does not bode well for their modern replacements either. However, as I have noted, the passing of the book—of the book in general and the standard printed book in particular—seems, at this juncture at least, neither inevitable nor "imminent"; nor will book reading and writing go by the board any time soon. Oddly enough, not only does the book live on despite its most innovative and hippest challenges, but, in the very form of the latter, it also appears to be chasing its tail. After all, how is the hyperlinkage utopia of the Babel Library different from that which Internet-ready Kindle will eventually become according to the its designers? And, as current commercials make it plain, is not the gadget's ultimate dream to be handled (held "in the sun," "dog-eared," "thumbed through") like an old-fashioned book? It does bear further asking, then, along these lines, "whether...Amazon's Kindle and related electronic reading and scrolling systems...spell a definitive break in the history of the book or" they mark no more than the book's "cybernetic extension and supplement" (1). Is the book's deepest drive, one wonders, to fall by the wayside as quasi-instant, disem-

bodied encryption and decryption event, as purely digital epiphany? Or, the other way around, are e-readers on a path inevitably leading, albeit in other embodiments, back to the classical book? Do books "want" to turn into or yield to something else and thus die out, or are Nooks, Tablets, iPads, and other touch-screen gizmos going for absolute book mimicry, embarked as they themselves are on a book-becoming adventure? To rephrase the questions: Does the electronic future of data production and circulation lie in the book's never quite past past? Is, deep down, the upgrading of the BlackBerry PlayBook a covert downgrading headed ouroborically toward this intriguing past of the book's present and material presence—textile and tactile, olfactorily spellbinding, intoxicating not only intellectually but also sensually?

If we answer "yes" to the last few questions, as I would, that may be because cognition remains profoundly corporeal, erotic even, no matter how code developers, web designers, e-librarians, on-demand printers, and other latter-day Cartesians "feel" (or rather do not) about it. But, speaking of feeling, let us say you will end up "feeling" Kindle as much as you "feel" an octavo. Can you cuddle with a Google book, though? This surely is a rhetorical question—for now. But, seriously, if you cannot, how much of the text are you actually taking in? Arguably, the consummate immateriality of the electronic medium is bound to immaterialize and otherwise shortchange content on some level (which is why Kindle has been bending backwards to re-corporealize reading as venue and experience broadly—witness once more the recent "cuddly" ads). On this and other grounds, disembodied code is an end neither ontologically nor epistemologically regardless of what some characters of DeLillo, Gibson, or Michel Houellebecq think or wish. There is some evidence that the world does not exist necessarily to supplant its books by whatever third- , fourth- , or umpth-order inscription and delivery system. In fact, the opposite is true, or has been so far, as the poet put it with memorable clarity back in the symbolist heyday: the world's purpose is to blossom into a book. Furthermore, this credo rests on a deeper one, in the world's textual makeup, implying as it does that this world is structurally and logically, as structure and reflection of the cosmogenetic logos, a book or book-like. This is too the belief that, in the final analysis, enables us, at the other end of history, to picture the world as expanding assemblage of overlapping webs and Wallersteinean world-systems. This intimation of inter- and pan-textuality lies at the core of the Mallarméan tradition, which, again, is a more theoretically salient sequence in a much longer line of thought stringing together the mystical, encyclopedic, philological, and stylistic thematics of the book throughout the Judeo-Christian millennia.

Up until now, Walter Benjamin has been a milestone in critical theory history—if a rather "moving" one—but not necessarily in this line. Things will have to change following Sussman's trailblazing attempt to "book" Benjamin, primarily in the "Booking Benjamin" chapter of *Around the Book* (107-137), for joining decisively in the unsystematic and heteromediatic (media-unspecific) conjuring up of 21st-century data systems. Building on an argument sketched out initially in his 2005 volume *The Task of the Critic*, the author rightly insists that key to the pre-digital imaginary

in writers like Benjamin is the "display in which information and its script are configured" (xviii). With the "ecology of writing," which Sussman broached in his 2007 *Idylls of the Wanderer: Outside in Literature and Theory*, "display" is another proto-network concept helping us get a handle on the "gestation" if not on the actual birth of the digital form in analog format. This digitality *avant la lettre* lies dormant in Benjamin, Kafka, the early Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and the entire rhizome strain in contemporary theory from poststructuralism and postmodernism to transnational and global studies, Hardt and Negri, and beyond. Sussman's supremely learned and illuminating book sets out to wake up precisely this undercurrent, "literalize" analytically this pre-literal encoding of the digital and the webbed in the *livresque*, or, in his own words, "render cybernetic processes explicit in reading, writing, and critique" and thus "harvest the nuances" brought out retroactively "by technological parlance and imagery" (xxi).

There is a general sense in which, as the critic contends,

> Both theoretically and historically-culturally, literature furnishes the display or screen affording the dominant systems of ideology, might, social administration, and technology, what might be termed the Prevailing Operating System of their place and moment, their most vivid and unfettered registration or tracing. Literatures, then, are not merely the basis for a broad range of institutions configured around cultural and aesthetic contracts, those concerning, for instance, sciences, technologies, historical phenomena, and art forms and their notable practitioners. They open the very arena, platform, or space for the critical registration, recapitulation, analysis, and reimagination or supplementation of the prevailing systems of actuality (12).

Already proposed by Sussman in his 1997 *Aesthetic Contract: Statutes of Art and Intellectual Work in Modernity*, an "aesthetic contract" is the compact or "understanding" embedded in a genre, current, or whole movement and featuring, both directly and allusively, stipulations on the roles assigned to art and artists during a specific time period. As the author readily admits, a book's aesthetic DOS, so to speak, features prescriptions and injunctions by and large bent on enforcing the cultural and political arrangements aka "Prevailing Operating Systems" (POS), which basically gears the book toward a rehearsal of the status quo. But, since books are prone to "speaking out at both sides of [their] mouth[s]" (21), this is only half the story. Fundamentally textual, said contracts are less binding than the legal ones and thereby more open-ended, even self-emendating, doing the bidding of the law and concurrently making provisions for the law's "illegibility," for its undoing. On such contractual platforms, books are "programmed" to sanction the POS in place but also to rewire them critically and thus block their "self-perpetuation" (13). Ultimately, this is what "the enduring literary programmers of the twentieth century...from Conrad through Kafka, Proust, and Joyce to Borges" did as they "addressed an increased regulation and systematization prevalent in the subcomponents within and between technologically 'advanced' and economically exploitative societies" (12).

In a stricter sense, however, pre-information society programmers can claim

accomplishments beyond the figurative indictment of socio-technological systems' "incoherence" (13), arbitrariness, or totalist overreach (a critique, I might add, carried on with varying degrees of success these days by antiglobalists, "altermondialists," and other net pessimists). Now, what it takes to "reprogram" cultural history so as to bring out such achievements persuasively is a critic of Sussman's stature. The erudition, acumen, and exquisite prose undoubtedly strike the reader of his previous work. What stands out here besides them is an uncommonly keen eye for how the age-old book "rubric" has allowed for "current reconfigurations of knowledge, pedagogy, archiving, and communications" (20). Thus, the book, Sussman maintains, makes not only for the premier, capacious receptacle of a certain thematics, which may or may not be about a future, superiorly webbed world. The book also provides a one-of-a-kind formal template inherently keyed to "displaying" textually that futurality before the latter's medium-specific arrival proper while checking, in the display itself, the medium's ominous tendency—famously tackled by Heideggerians and Pynchonians—to shoot over our heads, "instrumentalize" its users, and otherwise map its homogenous configuration onto the variegated cultural geography of the human.

Around the Book's introduction draws from Borges's *ficciónes*, Deleuze and Guattari, Peter Greenaway's film rendition of Sei Shōnagon's early 11th-century Japanese courtly masterpiece *The Pillow Book*, and Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* to put together a reading algorithm for sketching out a history of the modern *livresque* as proto-web discourse. Fragmentary, *en miettes*; quintessentially quotational and necessarily comparative; isolating textual "vignettes" of larger relevance and cobbling them together à la Benjamin (95), by means of montage-like, ever-expanding, ever-tentative, culturally and geopolitically transgressive combinations and permutations; jocular, non-teleological, and taking all the heuristic chances one could possibly take: this history is—must be, I am thinking—just one of the several conceivable and therefor a sharp departure from the Romantic-positivist philosophy that subtended Western literary historiography up until a few decades ago. What Sussman basically works out is a model of how the analog (pre-)history of web thinking might be written. He does not finish this history, which, truth be told, cannot be completed either, for the model in question is not Hegelian but Kabbalistic-Borgesian. To be sure, it is somebody like Borges rather than Hegel (or Francesco de Sanctis for that matter) who paves the road to 21st-century systems of communication and data storage, with "The Library of Babel" a dry run for Google Books and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" a prototype of sorts for Google Earth (to say nothing of the profound Borgesianism of authors such as George Landow and Michael Joyce). Attending to an incoherent, uncoordinated informational infinite—to a Babel read through Deleuze and Guattari, "rhizomically"—the historian is not, cannot possibly be, an "engineer," but, as Lévi-Strauss and Derrida would have it, a "bricoleur." He improvises, makes do, and "wings it," epistemologically and otherwise; his path is always forking; his lookout points shift because he has so much to choose from in terms of trail mark-

ing options and evidence marshaled—he adduces Greenaway, but he could have as profitably turned, say, to Dai Sijie's no less erotically and politically haunting *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. Open-ended, isomorphic in regards to its subject matter, *Around the Book* is the consummate *ex libris* adventure that goes just like that, around the book and books, weaving in and out of them, hinting formally, by its own "display," at a hypertext or hyperhistory, if you will, that calls for its reader's imaginative participation, inferences, and educated guesses.

This reader, at least, would have ventured that Kafka had to be given pride of place among Sussman's historical vignettes. An internationally recognized expert on the subject, the critic does come back to him in "Extraterrestrial Kafka: Ahead to the Graphic Novel" (49-106) to shed new light on the "architectural disorientation" (53) animating *The Castle* and other Kafkaesque edifices. This is, we learn, a protocol as thematic (architectural) as formal (architextural), which Deleuze and Guattari will further "deterritorialize" in their "minor literature" theory and contemporary network imaginaries will belabor, whether they know it or not (105), across media. "Extraterrestrial Kafka" attends primarily to the great writer's comic book legacy, but worth mentioning here are also Sussman's perceptive glosses on the writing machine and the politics of its poetics ("operating system") in "In the Penal Colony" (98-99), on the "Information Age" crisis world-premiered in *Amerika*, and on the sway of coopting informational and legal networks in *The Trial*. As Sussman abundantly shows, at this level the Kafka corpus sets its author up as a "cultural programme[r]"(79) or, better yet, "reprogramm[er]" of the public imaginary around a socio-spatial paradigm quintessentially, prodigiously, and prophetically relational.[2]

Even though Benjamin's "print-medium website" (56) *Arcades Project* comes after Kafka—it will be published much later, in 1982—*Das Passagen-Werk* warrants retrospectively the uncovering of Kafka's "phantasmagoric" architectonics. If Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* authorizes Sussman's "history *en vignettes*"—no less than his "piecemeal" history *en miettes*—*The Arcades Project* has a deeper, methodological relevance across his 2011 book. He is right on target: living up to its name, the *Project* is Benjamin's "Book of the Future" (111); pointing, through its very features, beyond itself, to a post-analog and post-print future, the Jewish-German thinker's book is the séance medium in which our media-driven world shows its face. If Georges Bataille "fulfilled his" Talmudic mission by "watching over" the *Project*'s manuscript (113), Sussman gets closer to scrutinize the latter's pages. His stewardship, no less salutary, attends diligently to that face along the analytic lines drawn in the introduction, namely, explains to us why time's passing has not defaced the face but, to the contrary, has enhanced its meaningful complexion. A textual phenomenology of "interconnectedness" (117) that plays out in the "convoluted," "hypertextual" (135) juxtaposition of seemingly arbitrary cross-sections of 19th-century Parisian topology, the *Project* presents itself, both in what it does and in what it falls short of, as the missing link between the Talmud and opensource.com. Original and (because?) derivative, productive and reproductive, commenting

as it quotes (and vice versa), describing as it compiles and ascribing (meaning) as it doubts, coalescing and self-dissolving (136), Benjamin's reluctant book has a problem with the world as much as with itself as textual closure. Resistance to representation (mimesis) and self-resistance as semiotically stabilizing structure are here one—and one major lesson Benjamin will pass on to Derrida.

This lesson comes fully into focus in the "poetic deconstruction" chapter (138-162). The book that is not one—the book (*à venir*) heralding the digital future of its crisis, "planning" its strategic obsolescence as new media and venues—erects a majestic "portal to impossibility" (156). Singularly expansive among such mystical and textual gateways, the Benjaminian arcades open onto this aporetic, counter-messianic messianism, thus setting the stage for Derrida's *Glas*, the ultimate split-screen peek into a POS history that, Sussman demonstrates, runs through Hegel (and Genet) before showing up, like the ink of the Torah's invisible text, on the radar of the neo-Kabbalistic, deconstructive reading. This is what, *au fond*, Hegel, Kant before him, and an entire tradition of thought thereafter should look to us in the wake of Sussman's critical "hard play" (196): "computers without hardware" (197) whose rationalist circuitry gets rewired, over and over again, in the increasingly language- and media-specific POS of Benjamin, once more taken up in chapter 8 ("Atmospherics of Mood"), and of Gregory Bateson, on whose mind ecology chapter 9 zeroes in.

The rewiring kicks into high gear with the new media poetics of the Internet age. This is, in short, one of the main contentions Perloff puts forth in *Unoriginal Genius*, a sequel, in a way, to her 1990 *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Not only is this poetics "citational"—or "memorious," as I have dubbed it elsewhere with a nod to Borges—hence its creative "unoriginality."[3] But the history of this citationalism, whose genealogy leads Perloff's introductory chapter back to Elliott, Pound, and Joyce, runs most illustratively through Benjamin's "excerptive" passageways. Very simply speaking, Perloff's book as a whole and, in particular, its second chapter, "Phantasmagoria of the Marketplace: Citational Poetics in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*" (24-49), reinforce Sussman's argument by narrowing the discussion down to contemporary poetry. Here too Benjamin's *Project* proves pivotal, to the extent that it "anticipate[s] in an uncanny way the turn writing would take in the twenty-first century" (the "new century" in Perloff's title), "now that the Internet has made copyists, recyclers, transcribers, collators, and reframers of us all." His work "become[s] the digital passages we take through websites and Youtube videos, navigating our way from one Google link to another and over the bridges provided by our favorite search engines and web pages" (49). Writing poetry "in this new arcade-world," Perloff concludes her Benjamin chapter, "is no easier than it ever was. Just different" (49).

How strong is this difference, though? If it is a function of digitality, if, in other words, it stems from websites, blogs, interactive software, and "public domain"-sanctioned authorship claims, as it often does, then the novelty of the new poetics rides more on the latest media venues and languages and less on the actual *techne*

poietike. The lyrical POS of Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Kenneth Goldsmith, and other "unoriginal geniuses" summoned in the final chapters can be traced back to the archival gluttony of the modern precursors of postmodern intertextuality, a list of names that, after Sussman's and Perloff's groundbreaking interventions, would now have to feature Benjamin right at the top. At the same time "programmed" and deferred by the philosopher, the book's ambiguous passing passes through antedigital modernity's *Passagen* bazaar. Only, "programming" does not equate "phasing out." It is an "updating" affair, rather, à la Duchamp's ready-mades and *coloriages originaux* in the *Nu descendant un escalier* series, on which both critics dwell and which will be successively and "unoriginally" "colored" and *étalés* in various "display[s]," signages, and montages (43) by the Brazilian concrete poets (chapter 3), the postmoderns, and the writers of the digital epoch. "Befittingly" unfinished, "still in progress at the time of [its author's] death" (24), the *Project* fantasizes formally about the historical progress of writing-as-rewriting, about the increasingly determinant role of cultural reproduction in the mechanics of discourse production.

"[W]hat look[ed] like web-page design" (32) was not, or not yet, "back then"—not in the "soft" inscriptions of handwritten, "cut-and-paste" entries, proto-hyperlinks, and bibliographic files through which Benjamin encoded Parisian space and modernity's larger expanse with it. But it will be. Or, it *will have been* rather, elusively stitched as it lay into the futurality of Bejaminian visionarism, as suggested earlier. And, when that will have taken place, Benjamin, along with Mallarmé, Flaubert (of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*) before him, and all the insomniac copistes, utopian *flâneurs* of library isles, "unoriginal" writers, and other Barthesian-Foucauldian scriptors and scribes of analog modernity will go down in the revisionist history pieced together by Sussman and Perloff as true pioneers. This is, one may well argue at the dawn of the third millennium, the new or, better still, the newly acknowledged cultural avant-garde of a techno-cultural era for which Eugen Gomringer, Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, and their later, Internet-age heirs and heiresses serve as an *arrière-garde* (61) that "consolidates" earlier intuitions, experiments, and innovations in the materiality made available by the recent media. "Consolidation" (Perloff's term) is, then, not mere "repetition" (her caveat too). It designates, instead, the completion of a technically identical or similar project in a different format and cultural context. What is more, certain writers retrieve not just the procedure but also a subject matter that itself thematizes the agglutinant problematics of appropriation, recycling, and citation. A case in point is postmodern rewriting, with its hypercitational subset, the "writing through" made famous by John Cage's "Writing through the Cantos."[4] A world authority on Cage, Perloff leans on him throughout. He comes up in the introduction; then he comes back in chapter 4, where the critic turns to Bernstein's own attempt at "writing through Walter Benjamin" (76-98) in his Oulipoesque, blatantly "transcreative" libretto *Shadowtime* (98) composed for Brian Ferneyhough's 2004 opera; and Cage is still with us in chapter 5, where Perloff shadows Japanese-German author Yoko Tawada as she is writing her own way through Goethe's ballad

"Heidenröslein."

The Bernstein chapter starts out with an *Arcades Project* epigraph in which Benjamin expatiates on the citational travail of the historian. "The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part," Benjamin submits, "will underlie his presentation in the form of a written text in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context" (Benjamin 476). Historians, scholars generally, we gather, do no more than compile snippets of the surrounding "found text." They do not so much "originate" as they "find" and assemble. To do so, however, one has to see first. If the original genius "invents," as Romantic aesthetics had it, the unoriginal one spots the already invented, crafted, written, and spoken. He or she is a discriminate voyeur, an indiscrete witness who makes the private public by eavesdropping on the world's cultural murmur and rendering the invisible visible and the inaudible resonant, if earsplitting at times. Few people actually have the gift of picking on and conveying this *livresque*, intensely chatty, intertextual environment. Duchamp was most certainly one; Howe (in Perloff's chapter 5 interpretation) is another. No doubt, Goldsmith—whose 2007 "conceptualist" *Traffic* Perloff redirects, for our benefit, to its (un)original, Benjaminian origins in the last section—must be added to this distinguished series too.

His case is perhaps the most astounding. "For the past five years," the poet acknowledges in an April 30, 2011 blog:

> I have been working on a rewriting of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* set in New York City in the twentieth century called *Capital*. As of this writing, the book is about 500 pages long, approximately half way to the 1000+ pages that constitutes Benjamin's book. The idea is to use Benjamin's identical methodology in order to write a poetic history of New York City in the twentieth century, just as Benjamin did with Paris in the nineteenth. Thus, I have taken each of his original chapter headings (convolutes) and, reading through the entire corpus of literature written about NYC in the twentieth century, I have taken notes and selected what I consider to be the most relevant and interesting parts, sorting them into sheaves identical to Benjamin's.

Again, rewriting works here as writing through. Goldsmith is a *flâneur* through the *Project*'s convoluted passages who comes out of the Benjaminian maze with a blueprint for his own city. He cites Benjamin much like Benjamin cited history. The blogging "ephebe," as Harold Bloom would be perhaps tempted to say, treats his precursor as the latter treated the world; in Goldsmith, Benjamin's ink comes spectacularly into view as much as the hidden Paris became discernable in the *Project*'s syncopated recitative. In novel forms, rhetorics, and incorporations, book tradition carries on. Naturally, it takes critics of Sussman's and Perloff's erudition and insight to defend this precious certainty.

Notes

1. My translation of the first paragraph of Stéphane Mallarmé's essay "Le livre, instrument spiritual," the third section of "Quant au livre" (273).

2. On the relational paradigm and its imaginary function in cultural history, also see the argument I develop in *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*.

3. See my book *Memorious Discourse: Reprise and Representation in Postmodernism*.

4. I deal with the subject systematically in *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning*.

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