A Note on Duchamp/Saussure and the Mysterious Sign of Accordance

The *Large Glass*, on the evidence of Marcel Duchamp's own notes from *The Green Box*, is the result of an attempt at a kind of pataphysical proof.Duchamp is looking to demonstrate that it is possible to isolate what he calls in his notes—"the sign of accordance"[(1)](quite specifically). This is ultimately Duchamp's aim and the test of whether his scientific experiment has been successful. What are the factors at work in this attempt? What are the conceptual tools at his disposal? The sign of accordance between what elements?

In Duchamp's notes from the *Green Box* he makes reference to one element, namely, a succession "[of a group] of various facts" that seem to depend on each other under "certain laws." He wants to determine the conditions which bring about the instantaneous State of Rest (extra-rapid; perhaps a photographic exposure; an indexical mark or trace) – that which brings a sudden halt to this succession of interdependent various facts. This accord (agreement/conformity) is between then, this State of Rest (a particular) and a choice of possibilities (authorised and determined by these certain laws). Here, as elsewhere,the thinly veiled language of photography and other physical-indexical processes is apparent in Duchamps notes. This much has already been noted by Duchamp scholars.

In another note from The *Green Box* Duchamp re-frames the problem in a slightly different way. Here, what was also previously an allegorical appearance has also become an allegorical "reproduction."What remains unchanged in this other note is that the required proof is still the isolation of "the sign of accordance."

A third re-framing of the problem by Duchamp – again from The

Green Box – takes an algebraic turn: he writes a sort of ur-formula:

a

–

b

Here “a” is the instantaneous State of Rest or extra-rapid exposition (or exposure), whilst “b” is the (or a) choice of possibilities. Duchamp makes a point in his notes here to the effect that this ratio of “a” over “b” is not given by a resultant (say) “c,” but by the sign (the horizontal bar) that separates “a” and “b.” This is effectively
the sign of his pursuit…”look for it.”

click to enlarge



Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp,Deluxe
edition of the *Green Box*, 1934

And here also he writes a curious thing: as soon as “a” and “b” are known they become new units and lose their relative value. In other words, as soon as a and b become – somehow – concrete or qualitative, they lose their previously held abstract quantative character. Here again Duchamp rehearses the refrain of looking for the sign of accordance or rather of something else related to the concept of accordance (perhaps parallelism or something else?). Where else might we find a similar search?

Some speculations – hopefully not too idle. Duchamp seems to

be searching for some process, some abstract relation, not dissimilar from the concerns of classical semiotics[2] – a theoretical discipline struggling to be born in the years prior to the First World War via the nineteenth century research and writings of, for example, William Dwight Whitney in America and Hippolyte Taine in France. For where can we find a similar set of problems articulated (almost during the same time)? Look at Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics[3].Some of the parallels, at the level of ideas, with Duchamp's writings from *The Green Box*, are quite uncanny (as in a kind of unfamiliarity within familiarity…). The interesting thing here is that, despite being at the beginning of a new Science of Signs, Saussure's researches into the workings of language were tinged with a kind of madness and, in that sense, it makes a comparative study all the more compelling.

At the time Duchamp was formulating his ideas for The *Large Glass*, it appears untenable that he knew anything of Ferdinand de Saussure's research. (Saussure wrote very little and published less.) Saussure's *Course*, based on the notes of his students, was published posthumously by Payot in Paris in 1916, but there appears to be no biographical or documentary evidence that Duchamp ever read the book. However the "correspondences" were in the air at the time, and it should be of little surprise that these two thinkers where approaching similar intellectual projects – albeit from radically different directions.

So Saussure's "sign of accordance"—how did he "look for it?"

What follows is a rather sketchy and caricatured version of (a small part of) Saussure's *Course* but it will, possibily, go some way to illustrating some of the similarities in the thinking of these two very different "researchers."

Because of his dissatisfaction with previous attempts to map out the specific and detailed contours of a study of language, Saussure set about the task himself and in doing so focused on what he saw as the most elemental characteristics. For

example, Saussure had to first establish the building block of his discipline. How did he do this? He started from an act of speech from a specific spoken sound and as he saw it its accompanying idea. From this simple coupling, he articulates the beginning of a new social science.

A language…is a social institution. But it is in various respects distinct from political, juridical and other institutions. Its special nature emerges when we bring into consideration a different order of facts. A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable military signals and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems. It is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence general psychology. We shall call it semiology…[4]

click to enlarge

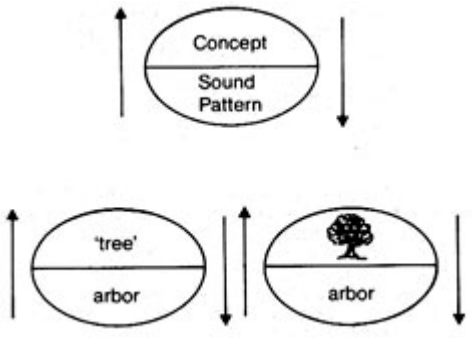

Figure 2
Ferdinand de Saussure,
diagram for two-sided
psychological entity

So here we have Saussure's momentous founding of a new social science. Its most elemental structure, according to Saussure, is "The Sign" which he illustrates thus[5]
: (Fig. 2)

What we have here is three ways of picturing what Saussure called a "two-sided psychological entity." [6] In this diagram

he is using (appropriately enough for a comparison with Duchamp and The *Large Glass*) an example of the word "arbor" where the concept or idea of "tree" sits above what Saussure calls the "sound pattern." This "concept" has a relation with its "sound pattern" which involves a kind of two-way communication across the line that "divides" the two psychological entities. At one point in his notes Saussure also compares this relation to the two sides of a sheet of paper. *Recto* (say) is the idea or thought and *verso* being the sound pattern. "Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought or thought from sound…Linguistics, then, operates along this margin, where sound and thought meet."[(7)]

It is important to remember that what we have here is effectively a structural relationship between an idea and the mental imprint, if you like, of that idea's articulation. Although Saussure called the sign "concrete," in many ways it is actually an abstract construction, more or less. It, the Saussarian sign, is neither a relation between a spoken word and its concept nor a thing entirely in the world. As Saussure says, "A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern" and "…[a] sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound…"[(8)] Today, these structural features of the sign are known more familiarly. However, often they are misunderstood as "signifier" (the Saussurian "concept") and "signified" (the "sound pattern").

In the Saussurian view, moreover, the relation between the signifier and the signified is to a greater or lesser extent unmotivated, conventional relation here but ask for this to be taken—for the purposes of this short essay—as "given." What this amounts to though is that signs (or potential signs) it can only be isolated by what it is not. Saussure says that.

"…language itself is nothing other than a system of pure values…"[9] and that, the ultimate law of language is, therefore, dare we say, that nothing can ever reside in a single term. This is a direct consequence of the fact that linguistic signs are unrelated to what they designate, and that therefore "a" cannot designate anything without the aid of "b" and vice versa. In other words, both have value only by the differences between them, or neither has value, in any of its constituents, except through this same network of forever negative differences.[10]

So we have at this point a sign constructed of two conventionally related components (both psychological) which as a combination have value only in relation to what the combination is not. It is at this point that Saussure's *Course* takes what I would call, an even more Duchampian turn. Look at this diagram[11] :

click to enlarge

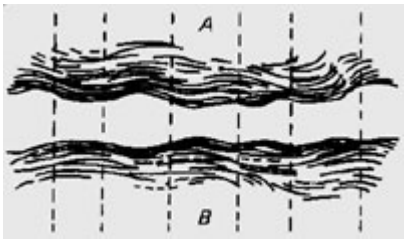

Figure 3
Ferdinand de Saussure,
sign of accordance

Here we have, effectively, Saussure's illustration of his sign of accordance.(Fig. 3) For in this diagram what haunts his ideas on the sign is the nature of the relation between the signifier (A) and the signified (B). However, look at that gap! A shifting nothingness sliced by the temporal relation with other signs. Moreover these "other signs" are never really present as such. What is more, a substitution of a form of ideogramme for a phonetic text derived from the Greek

alphabet brings more clearly into focus the “vulgar” comparison with not only The *Large Glass*, but also, perhaps, begins to show the limitation of the Saussurian sign—one which (albeit unwittingly) I believe Duchamp was questioning.

Like the cleavage between The Bride and Her Batchelors, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is, coincidentally, a separation and a pulling together. Saussure indicates that the two elements of the linguistic sign are intimately linked.[12]Elsewhere in the *Course*, however, Saussure describes the relation between signifier and signified as mysterious. When it comes to establishing the nature of the “bar,” or the entity, that both separates and links the two entities of the sign together, Saussure starts to struggle (we might even say teeter) on the edge of Reason. Prior to this point in his *Course* his articulations have largely followed a form of logic.[13] But then…

Psychologically, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed that were it not for signs, we should be incapable of differentiating any two ideas in a clear and constant way. In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure.

But do sounds, which lie outside this nebulous world of thought, in themselves constitute entities established in advance? No more than ideas do. The substance of sound is no more fixed or rigid than that of thought. It does not offer a ready-made mould, with shapes that thought must inevitably conform to. It is a malleable material which can be fashioned in to several parts in order to supply the signals that thought has need of. So we can envisage the linguistic phenomenon in its entirety the language, that is as a series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous thought (A), and on the equally

featureless plane of sound (B)…. Thought, chaotic by nature, is made precise by this process of segmentation. But what happens is neither a transformation of thoughts into matter, nor a transformation of sounds into ideas. What takes place is a somewhat mysterious process by which "thought-sound" evolves into divisions, and a language takes shape with its linguistic units in between those two amorphous masses. One might think of it as being like air in contact with water:changes in atmospheric pressure break up the surface of the water into a series of divisions, i.e. waves. The correlation between thought and sound, and the union of the two, is like that.[14]

Saussure is trying to grapple with the problem he has, himself, set up. For he is struggling, metaphorically, with a strange and mysterious confluence which, earlier in his notes, was a single fixed line (albeit one which entertained contrary vectors). We could perhaps go further and say that Saussure's construction of the sign held within itself its own critique, and, further, it could be argued that Duchamp was more aware of this than Saussure. Within The *Large Glass* the relationship between the The Bride and Her Bachelors is represented by three (not one) glass bars which are subject to feeble and faltering breaches – both electrical and mechanical. In contra-distinction to Saussure's amorphous "middle term," even Duchamp's middle has a middle.

click to enlarge

- 

Figure 4
Photograph of the
*Large Glass*at the
Brooklyn Museum of Art,
New York, in 1926

- 

Figure 5
Marcel Duchamp, The
Large Glass repaired, 1915-23

Before Duchamp's *Large Glass* was broken and repaired the few photographs of it show that the division between The Bride and Her Bachelors was not as distinct as it is now. The repair of the two sections and the subsequent reframing have given The *Large Glass* a visual heaviness that it did not have when it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. (Figs. 4 & 5) Then, although the heavy wooden frame almost semed to threaten to crush the work it seemed to maintain its visual lightness and physical integrity. Now of course, the heavy framework more brutally (but only visually) separates The Bride and, her fantasies, Her Bachelors. By 1936 Duchamp's interests had moved on although to developments of very much related matters.

Notes :

Footnote Return 1. Marcel Duchamp, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her

Bachelors, Even: a typgraphic version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box*, trans. George Heard Hamilton (Stuttgart: Edition Hansjorg Mayer, 1976) unpaginated. All quotes are from this publication unless stated otherwise.

Footnote Return 2. In an unpublished Master of Arts dissertation, Richard Blakey, taking a "deconstructivist approach," relates the machinations of Duchamp's *Large Glass* via Saussure to Derrida – in his Of Grammatology – and Derrida's critique of Saussure's concept of the sign in Chapter 2 of that book. Here I am just trying to draw out a few (perhaps "naïve") associations from a perspective of Art History/Theory. See: R.Blakey, "Duchamp andThe Sign," diss., University of Sussex, U.K, 1991.

Footnote Return 3. Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983).

Footnote Return 4.Ibid., p.15.

Footnote Return 5. Ibid., p.67.

Footnote Return 6. Ibid., p.66.

Footnote Return 7. Ibid., p.111.

Footnote Return 8. Ibid., p.66.

Footnote Return 9. Ibid., p.110.

Footnote Return 10. Jonathan Culler, Saussure (London: Fontana Press, 1986), de Saussure quoted,

p.52.

Footnote Return 11. Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, 111.

Footnote Return 12. Ibid., p.15.

Footnote Return 13.What contradictions exist within the text of the *Course,* and there are a few (whether due to the inconsistencies in Saussure's exposition, interpretation by Saussure's students, or his translator), they are not the subject here.

Footnote Return

14. Ibid., pp. 110-111.

Figs. 1, 4, 5
©2002 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris. All rights reserved.