“From the Splash to the Flash, with the best wishes of Le Soigneur de Gravité,” The *Large Glass*: A Guided Tour

Jean Suquet, born in Cahors (Lot, in the South of France) on 22 June

Introductory Remarks

Jean Suquet, born in Cahors (Lot, in the South of France) on 22 June 1928, has been close to the Surrealist group since 1948.

One day during the spring of 1949, André Breton invited Suquet to show him some of his writings. Suspecting a relationship between Suquet’s work and Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*, Breton, who had been commissioned to write a book on Duchamp, suggested that Suquet do the book instead. Breton introduced him to Mary Reynolds and Jacques Villon.

In his first letter to Duchamp (Paris, 15 July 1949), Suquet wrote: *Si je dois écrire sur vous et votre oeuvre ce ne sera pas en critique mais en poète*. [If I have to write about you and your work, I will do so as a poet, rather than as a critic.] Duchamp answered (New York, 9 August): *Suis tout à fait d’accord pour votre projet. Et comme vous le dites, ‘en poète’ est la seule façon de dire quelque chose*. [Am in complete agreement with your idea. And like you say, ‘as a poet’ is the only way to say anything.]

In conjunction with a letter dated 12 December, Suquet sent him some forty or so pages of writing. Duchamp responded

immediately (25 December).His answer ended with nothing less than the following: *Après tout, je vous dois la fière chandelle d'avoir mis à nu ma mise à nu.* [After all, I really owe it to you to have stripped bare my stripping bare.]

However, Suquet's first Duchampian works (1949-1956) wouldn't be published at that time, except for *"Le Signe du Cancer*" ["The Sign of Cancer"] by *La Nef*, Paris, in the special issue of March-April 1950 (*Almanach Surréaliste du demi-siècle*).

The two men – 63 and 22 years old – met in Paris on 26 October 1950 at the home of Mary Reynolds who had just died.

From the first exchanged letters, one can tell, the tone was set. A conviviality was there and it remained for fifty years.

Suquet has published seven books, long and short ones, on Duchamp's work.

**Miroir de la Mariée*.
[The Bride's Mirror]. Paris: Flammarion, coll. "Textes," 1974.(267 p.)

**Le guéridon et la virgule*
[The pedestal table and the comma]. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1976.(128 p.)
**Le Grand Verre rêvé*
[The Large Glass of dreams]. Paris: Aubier, 1991. (169 p.)

**Le Grand Verre: Visite guidée*
[The Large Glass: A Guided Tour]. Caen and Paris: l=Échoppe,1992. (25 p.)

**Regarder l'heure. Sur le ciel de Marcel Duchamp*
[To look at the hour. Against the sky of Marcel Duchamp]. Caen and Paris:l'Échoppe, 1992. (24 p.)

**In vivo, in vitro*.
Paris: l'Échoppe, 1994. (119 p.)

**Marcel Duchamp ou L'éblouissement de l'éclaboussure*. [Marcel Duchamp or the dazzling of the splash]. Paris: Éd. l'Harmattan,coll. "L'art en bref," 1998. (124 p.)

Far beyond Breton's and Duchamp's deaths (in 1966 and 1968 respectively),
Jean Suquet "delays as a poet." He is currently 71 years old.

Even though Duchamp wrote to Suquet on 25 December 1949: *Vous savez sans doute que vous êtes le seul au monde à avoir reconstitué la gestation du verre dans ses détails, avec même les nombreuses*
intentions jamais exécutées [You know without a doubt that you're the only one in the world to have reconstituted the gestation of the glass in its details, including even the numerous intentions which were never materialized], it would be some decades and many essays before the understanding would become clear, in the path of this succinct "guided tour," that all the elements of the glass – *The Large Glass* – are in place.

André Gervais

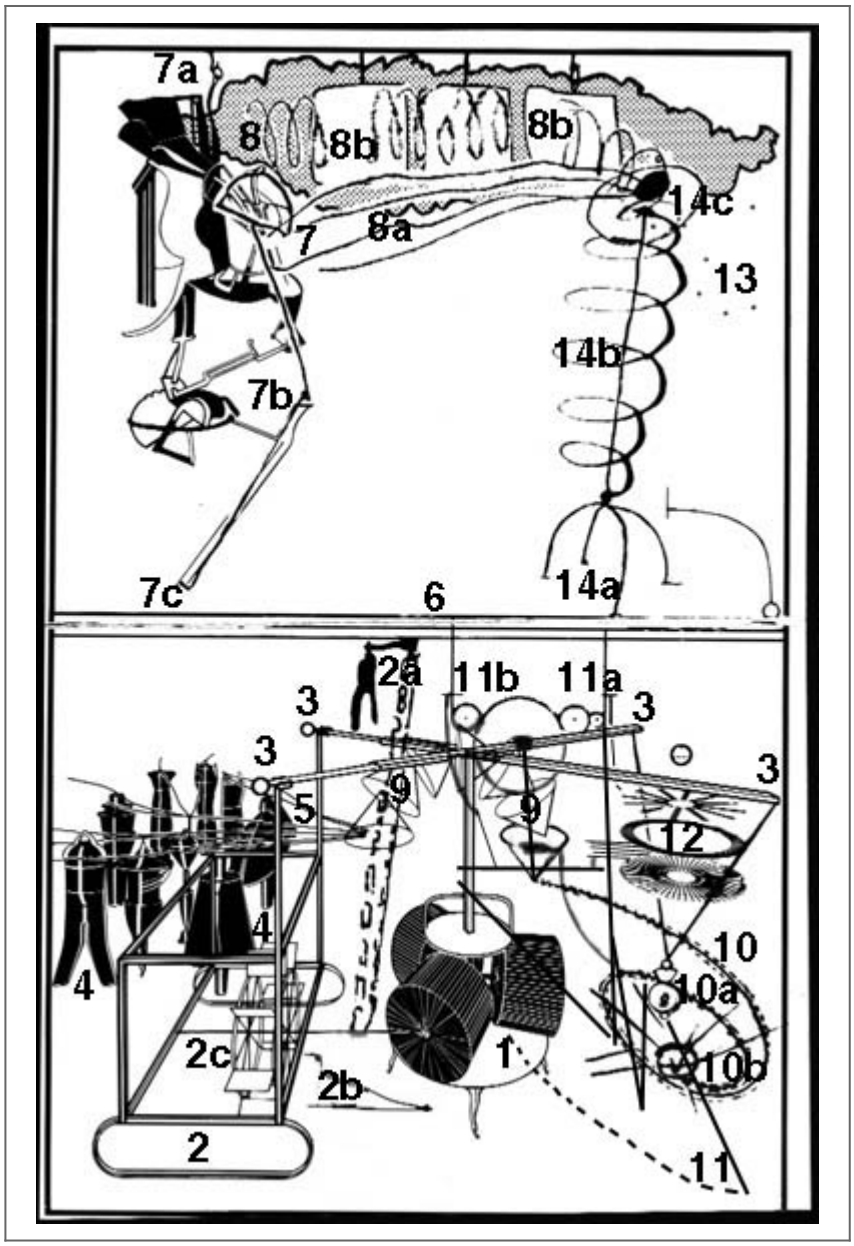
16 November 1999

THE LARGE GLASS: A Guided Tour

by Jean Suquet

translated by Julia Koteliansky with Sarah S. Kilborne

Marcel Duchamp's Scheme for *The Large Glass*


7a
8
8b
8b
14c
8a
7
13
14b
7b
7c
6
14a
2a
11b
11a
3
3
3
3
5
9
9
12
4
4
10
10a
2c
1
10b
2b
2
11

1 – Chocolate grinder.
2 – Slide.
2A -Driving hook and chain of revolution
2B -Underground pedal.
2C -Water mill.
3 – Large scissors.
4 – Bachelors.
5 – Capillary tubes.
6 – Horizon – Bride’s clothing.
7 – Bride, head or eyes.
7A -Suspension ring of the “Hanged” female.
7B -Wasp.
7C -Weather vane.
8 – Milky way flesh color.
8A -Meteorological extension.
8B -Roundtrip of the top inscription letters.
9 – Sieves.
10 -Planes of flow.
10A-Mobile of splash.
10B-Crashes – splashes.
11 -Cannon (?)
11A and
11B-Rams of the boxing match.
12 -Oculist charts.
13 -Shots.
14A-“Tripod” of the juggler-handler-tender of gravity.
14B-Spring of the juggler-handler-tender of gravity.
14C-Platform and black ball of the tender of gravity.

Being the one who punctuated the *Mona Lisa* with a mustache, who exhibited a urinal in a salon, Marcel Duchamp dashed off

salubrious mockeries from time to time, to amuse the “gallery” of artviewers, as if to put them on a false scent. Meanwhile, every day, almost entirely in secret, he was working on his “grand oeuvre,” which is today at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. *The Large Glass*, as much a window opening up a perspective as far as the eye can see, is formed by two vertical glass plates, one on top of the other, in a frame that is 1.76m wide x 2.72m high. On these glass plates, without offending the main part of their transparency, Marcel Duchamp outlined, using lead wire, austere echanical figures that are meanly stopped or, one could say, imprisoned in ice. He sketched them, erfected them, arranged them in schemes; he suggested their possible movements in notes, by pen, by encil; he scribbled them on pieces of paper in Paris between 1912 and 1915. He patiently and obsessively crystallized them in New York from 1915 until 1923, before he abandoned the piece in a *definitively unfinished* state. (The italics are Marcel Duchamp’s.) In 1933 he was told that the “oeuvre” on which he had spent thousands of hours of work had been accidentally broken into a thousand pieces. As if words themselves would escape from the lips of those breaks, he immediately undertook to publish his first and formative rough drafts of *The Large Glass* before even considering mending the disaster, which he would finally address in 1936. With the fervor of a water diviner and the carefulness of a monk copying a sacred text, he made a facsimile of each manuscript (he used the same paper, he tore outlines in the same way) and then gathered the jumbled up notes which made up ninety-three loose sheets in a luxurious box of green velvet, producing three hundred copies of this box in the autumn of 1934. A flight of leaps from the very first moment. On the cover of this marvelous *Green Box* is a constellation of dots in capital letters for us to decode into a sentence locked to its own equivocation: *LA MARIÉE MISE À NU PAR SES CÉLIBATAIRES MÊME* [The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even]. No need for the author’s name. Its sonority sparkles in the title:
*MAR*iée, *CÉL*ibataires. It’s similar to looking for *or* in

oreille.[1] Marcel Duchamp delivered his notes in the sumptuous disorder of a puzzle, as if he had wanted everyone to start the game over and to braid his own path through the nerve tissue of the breaks. He wished pure reign for the legend – provided that one would read it through the grid of *The Large Glass* – without giving away in silence any of its *given* data. In order to begin, the reader should better add a swig of fun to the mechanical scheme described in these pages. With the same playfulness, he will have to make thousands of words sing which echo; he will have to find the sources of this "oeuvre" in the most vivacious, the most breathtaking,the most insatiable desire which haunts every mortal; and in every articulation of this meager trace he will have to follow the thread of this or that imaginary escape – for example, of the elusive fourth dimension – time – which a painter can only make sense of by revealing the imprints of its passing. That is why none of the *rouages* [cogs], none of the *roueries* [cunning] should be left in the shadows. The gears speak if they can be matched with precision, according to the number of their teeth. And their forbidding machinery, their jubilant machinations, start up as soon as *mots* [words] provide them with a *moteur* [motor].

In the bottomhalf, in the very middle, the *chocolate grinder* (1) is turning;turning as it has been and as it will continue to do, in a circle, inorder to come back under the mere whip of repetition of the *adageof spontaneity: the bachelor grinds his chocolate himself*. We won't dwell on its dubious color or its essence of childhood. This triplemillstone propelled by a proverb, in spite of its size, in spite ofits central positioning, is useless except for the fact that it putsone on guard against the razzle-dazzle of the appearances. Next to it,a *slide* (2) goes back and forth over repeating *litanies*.

It jerks and rattles and opens and closes, oh, barely half way throughthe *large scissors* (3) which do not cut but whose large X, ontop of the bachelor's world, sharpens the poignant

question of an unknown.A bit further back from the infernal train of these grating scraps ofmockery, nine red fellows stand frozen at attention. They are the *bachelors*(4). They do not move, but the name that they wear slips and slides.This masquerade of uniforms, as hollow as if strictly dressed up, wasbaptized by Duchamp in the beginning as *eros matrix* and then,at the end, *cemetery*. Matrix and cemetery in one and the sameplace! A great gap must be overcome to be able to link at once the entranceand the exit. A subtle mobility, a quasi-spiritual fluidity must fillthese moulds of males reduced to their clothes. As a matter of fact,the bachelors are full of spirit – inflated with *illuminating gas*."Gas" comes from the Germanic "geist" meaning "spirit."Moreover, in 1912, gas wasn't yet reduced to its culinary usage. Itblew life into lamps, but before it met its match, *"l'hydrogène clarteux"* [glimmering hydrogen] remained invisible. The painter can onlyshow the demijohns which contain it, the pipes and *tubes* (5)which canalize it, or he can perceive out of its flow only the plumbingnailed to the walls. Meanwhile inside, spirit flows, time flies, gasleaks…

Let us, then, flow along together. This brother in wandering, let's accompany him on his *voyage* – in spite of the fact that he does not spare guiding traces. He does not say anything about the direction of the *route* [path], he hardly indicates the movement of the *roue* [wheel]. Thus, relying a lot on chance, dressed in personal rags, heavy with our own past, motivated by the very improbable prospect of enjoying the end of an *instantaneous rest*, let's enter the impersonal duration of *The Large Glass*. But before stepping over the threshold, let's pause while standing in front of it. At eye level (at least in the original frame) the fracture between the bottom and the top follows naturally the *horizon line* (6). Below, on the ground, the bachelors. On top, the *Bride* (7). What?! This skeletal puppet balancing at the zenith of the cemetery is actually the promised *female*? Could it be the spectre of Jocasta, the hanging mother of blinded Oedipus? Could death

and love have crossed their blades for the sake of the large scissors of the unknown? What does this formless form mean? Is it a fossil? Is it a trace of an inspiration, like the impression of a bird's talons on snow or sand? Can we imagine it from here below? Duchamp has only half-opened the keyhole of the vanishing point: he has designated the horizon as the *Bride's clothing*. An admirably just allegory! We know the duplicity of this imaginary line which is, after all, only an infirmity of the eye. Where sight is lost, there we see it being drawn. When we go towards it,it moves away accordingly. And the bachelors, who are rushing *pleins gaz* [flat out] to strip the Bride bare, keep before them in their own *regard* [gaze] the veil which they are rousing and agitating and which they are dying to unfasten. However, before they can actually unfasten the folds of perspective which blind them…

The Bride has undone her clothing which falls down onto the horizon and covers the world around. She is *nue* [nude], *nuages* [clouds], *nébuleuse* [nebula]. *Milky way flesh color* (8) writes Duchamp with one stroke of the pen, one flap of the wing.

C'est la vie! The Bride has a *life–center*. Her heart beats. The *throbbing jerk* of her *pulse*, palpitating like the convulsive abdomen of a *wasp* (a winged hymen), generates an *air draft*, a *blow*, a *wind* which sends out, to fray at the four points of the quadrant, an *oriflamme* [banner] of entrails and brains. On fire with infinity, the Bride escapes from her intimacies, she evaporates from appearance into transparency, she breaks out of the limits of her skin, escapes all outline, challenges all representation. Nubile, the maiden pours her heart out like a nebula. *Nue* [nude], she wants to be *une* [one] with the universe. She lets herself be captivated by the *meteorological extension* (8A), ripped out by the *tempests,* embellished by *fair weathers* (time takes the colors of weather), which merge her smoothly into the weave of the sky as *une flamme consistante* [a solid flame]. A *langue de feu* [tongue of fire], sublimated into what is fatal about it: *le*

langage [language]. The current of air going up through the Bride's porous flesh is charged with *lettres* [letters]. The blowing, rising her up, is her vivid voice. The flesh is made word. Even though, in her first outburst, the *blossoming* of the Bride was going to turn the top of *The*

Large Glass into a *vitrail* [stained-glass window] of entrails sparkling with fine copper, platinum and *golden dust*, the rise of pleasure transmuted gold into words, the *dew* of the lips into volatile ink. *Blossoming: to make an Inscription of it* (8B). The writing, which drags its ink, crackles. It blazes, it self-erases, it rises again, it flows back, it ploughs the Milky way flesh color from one end to the other. Breathtaking, always on the alert, letters deliver the *commandments*, *orders*, *authorizations* of the Bride to the bachelors. Times have really changed. Instead of a hefty fellow spitting out thunder, a woman reigns in the sky. She dictates law.

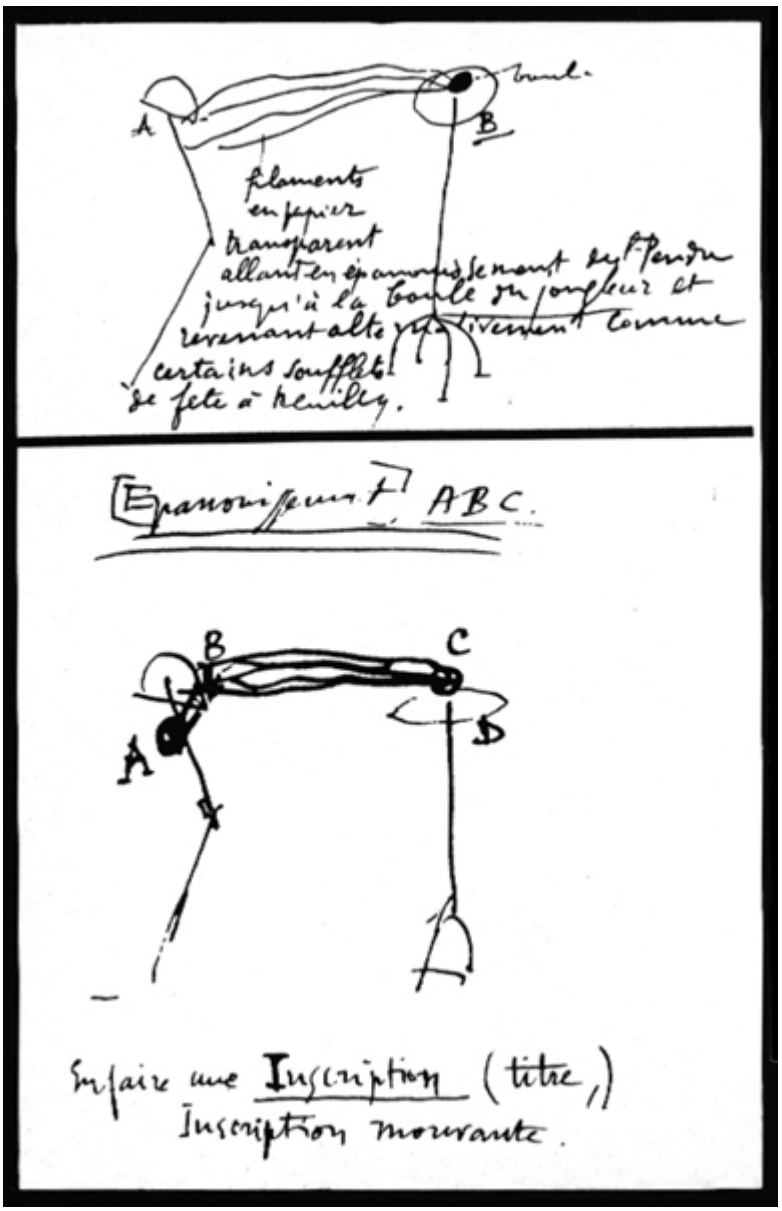
On the bottom, the gas is still far from the end of its hardships. From pipes into funnels, from *sieves* (9) into churns, from obscurity into narrowness, being compressed, stretched out, cut, re-cut, frozen, and finally liquefied as a floorcloth, spirit goes through all the states of matter. *La pesanteur* [gravity] humiliates it, and *la pesante heure* [weighty time] overwhelms it with even worse hitches. But that's in vain. Gas never gives up its *determination to rise*. Its most twisted avatar, the least conclusive of its laborious *progress*, fails to even slightly alter the dream which is going to *emancipate it from gravity*. And when on the bottom of the *planes of flow* (10) the blood-bursting gas drips its miserable puddle on the ground, it is always capable of exploding desire. Three or four of its drops regale the breech of the *cannon* (11) pointed towards the vanishing point. The artist/artillery man spits out a *bille de combat* [combat marble]. The bachelors, with Gallic pride, support the sky above their heads with the help of two *béliers* [battering rams](11A, 11B) standing straight, risen to the surface of the

horizon and flirting with its alluring underclothing. The *bille* [marble] releases the *béliers* [battering rams]. The sky falls. At least it intends to fall. For, with each shot, at the same time as the gas breaks up the supporters, whose parts are iron but whose joints are fragile, it infuses them with its dearest *childhood memories*: a resurgence of *ascensional magnetization*. The fallen rams raise their heads. And all starts over. *It wasn't exactly what I wanted*, concluded Duchamp. Thus, after five years of obstinate,ysterious work, distillations, incantations, decantations, backwardsreturns, fresh advances – of knights, bishops, queens and kings – thereverse of *The Large Glass* is silvered. In this mirror,using a scalpel on line after line to the point of scratching out theeyes, no second chances possible, he engraves three ready-made *oculistcharts* (12) which had been borrowed from an optician's shop windowand placed in perspective. By the end of its apprenticeships, the gasunderstands what destiny its name implies. Being illuminating, it mustilluminate – starting with making itself clear. Under the shock of onelast fall, of a shattering weight (10A) thrown into the puddle by theintervention of the scissors, it leaps out in *éclaboussures* [splashes](10B) – whose sublimation maintains only *éclat* [brilliance].The gas sets its own body on fire. It declares its flame. On the springboardof the oculist mirrors, which peel off its last dregs and correct thearrow of its ultimate rise, it spouts into the sky in a burst of rays.The soaring is described by Duchamp in a flight of alliterations: *éblouissementde l'éclaboussure* [dazzling of the splash]. The late illuminatinggas fades into the core of its own light. It discovers there the originof its own *interior lighting*. And it metamorphoses for the lasttime. Even though they are ablaze, these are *not the drops themselves*>which *pass over the horizon* and *find their opening towards the infinite* in the constellation of the nine *shots* (13); *but their image* does. Which is the exact physiological definition of the gaze. When a ray of grains of light riddles the retina, the light doesn't

go beyond and find its way through the gray matter thickness; but its image at the nerve level does, as a bunch of electrical impulses, of chemistries and chimeras.

So, the energies at work in *The Large Glass* tend to unite. On the top, a flood of words. On the bottom, a flux of light. At the end of the voyage, the gas is transmuted into a dazzling gaze, the Bride, into effervescent writing. And the stripping bare, according to Duchamp's wish, can therefore be read as a *poem*. Which rhymes the *épanouissement* [blossoming] of the Bride with the *éblouissement* [dazzling] of the bachelors. We'll turn this already rich rhyme into gold by extracting from it this last word: *OUI* [yes].

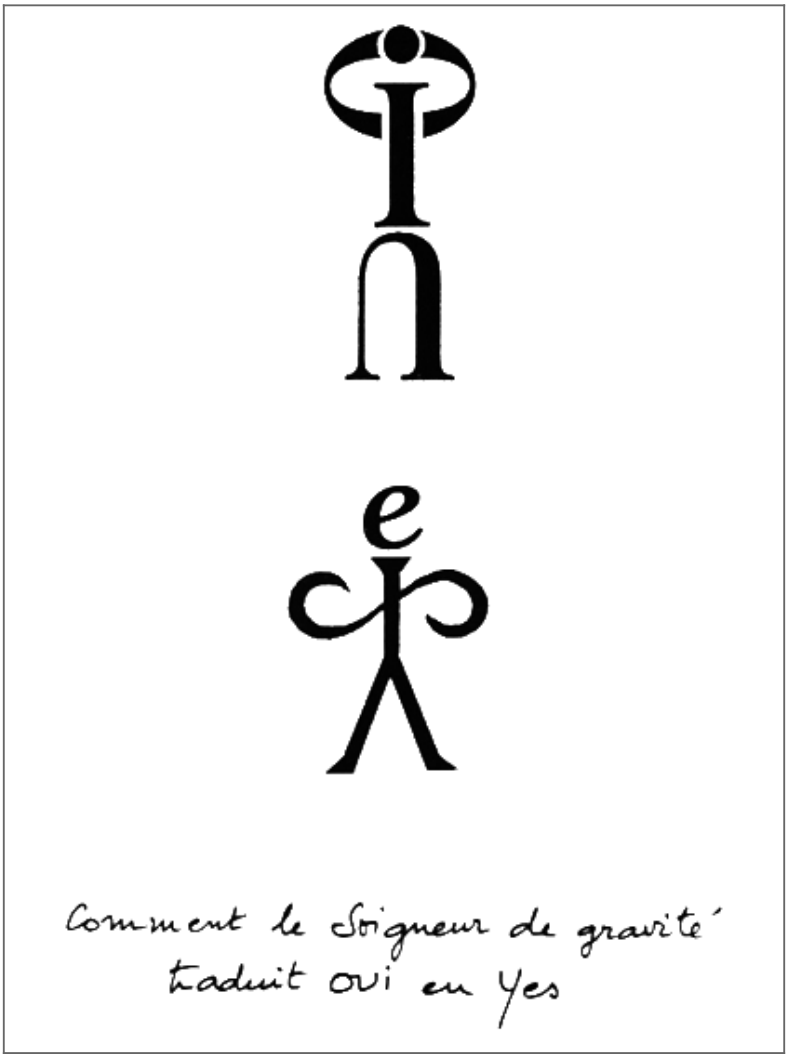
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“You don’t say!” burst out laughing the supporters of *NON* [no]. Between the horizon and the Milky way there’s a transparent immensity, in which Duchamp had not drawn any signs, neither a cloud nor the cast shadow of a dash. There are only solitudes. It’s having never looked at the sky on a beautiful night. The Milky way marries the roundness of the vault of night and bows until it touches the horizon. No need for a giant to give shape to this pure effect of perspective. It’s enough to have a being *whose forms have no longer in relation to their destination a mensurability*, for example the letters of the alphabet, upper and lower cases, which forward and deliver the same message. In fact, a troubadour enters into the scene and will reveal himself as the Bride’s letter-

weight, the lady's spokesman: the *juggler of the center of gravity* (14). He DANCES on the horizon line. He flexes, he straightens himself up, from one foot to the other, at the mercy of the cannon shots, according to the wish of the splashes. His body, sharpened into a spring, twists like an endless screw between the bottom and the top. At his head, he erects a round *platform* in which a *black ball* rolls. That's the clot of darkness he juggles with. He dances, he translates the jerks of the machine through twirling the ball which concentrates the *waves of unbalance* of the bachelors' commotion. The ball vacillates,zigzags, dangerously brushes against the edges, but it does not fall. For the Bride sends it *orders of new balance* by licking it with a flame tongue, by flicking it with touching letters which *contrecarrent* [thwart] its *écarts* [swerves]. Five times, in drawings and model, Duchamp represented this deus ex machina in the shape of a *guéridon* [pedestal table], of a *table tournante* [swivel table]. A streamer on its *three legs* (sometimes four, or two), it is the Oracle of the *married-divinity*. One knock, two knocks, three knocks — like all gods, it doesn't exist. *The Large Glass* cleared it away into transparency. The fundamental dodge making diabolic the empty space, the miraculous blank around which the puzzle has been reconstituted. So that,
for all the onlookers who had not read, or misread, the directions for use, it does not work, it cannot work. These infidels don't hear the screeching of the grain of salt crunched by the gears, > they forget to deduce the god from these signs, from these marks. In the title, for example, he curves a comma's tail, sliding it in between the plural *célibataires* [bachelors] and the singular *même* [even], *virgule* [comma], there is no dead language except Latin which admits its real name: virga. Oh yes! He's the one in the salons today whom everybody calls Mister Phallus.
The one who shines in his own absence, who acts all the better since he is not there. *To the sounds of the stripping bare*, this dancer changes his name as if it were a mask. With one last stroke of the pen,Duchamp instituted the appellation:

Tender of gravity. The doctor of the law *de la chute des graves* [of the collapse of the graves] who unites the One in the sky with us on the ground. The volatile physician who heals the grave horizontal cut, who turns into a song the cry, indicated by Duchamp in the first draft of his *preface*: *Given that, if I suppose I'm suffering a lot*. And what kind of remedy, what drug or alcohol is carried by the *guéridon* that is the Bride's bed-side table? It's enough to address it sharply and to enjoy one of the puns Duchamp had been so fond of: *guéris donc!* [so heal!]. And *si tu es gai, ris donc!* [if you're cheerful, then laugh!]. To heal gravity is to laugh. With the dot on the "i" shaped like a black ball. By spelling the letters of the Bride, the trismegistus juggler-handler-tender of gravity undresses this well-balanced virtue labeled by Duchamp: *irony of affirmation*. He personalizes OUI from top to toe. A OUI, whose letters anybody can make dance to their liking:



How the Tender of Gravity *translates ‘Oui’ into ‘Yes’*

Notes

Footnote Return 1. Tr. “or” is French for “gold”; “oreille” is “ear”