**WRITING, AND CHECK MARKS (OR, THE GENIUS OF PHILIP GLASS)**

How can one mark on someone’s manuscript, shaped like a sharp boomerang, or a reversal from a dead-end street, or like the mark a bird’s feet will leave in dust, repeated dozens or a hundred tines, have such an effect on the recipient, that it becomes an essay?

Are repeated check marks on a creative manuscript a proof of inadequacy, or avoidance, or of being too important to care or come up with words? Is the person using them claiming the rights of clergy, when almost all the rest of the world is parishioner? Or is the check mark the notation of defeat and indifference, and a deft, polite, sharp mark of jealousy, dressed up as indifference, toward all the receivers?

Everyone’s friend Jealousy thinks many usurping someones have been terribly unfairly allotted something, which someone else deserved much, much more, to own, or have. Its goal, admitted or not, is to deprive the owner of something fine, or, of at least the power to deprive the ownetr of some of that luster attached to fineness. If they have silver-plated knives, forks, and spoons, it might be nice, say, to see tarnish, to chip at it with your own indestructible stainless-steel very glossy stainless-steel knife with a curved, muskety sort of handle.

It’s something Philip Glass must feel each time he steps near musicians who play even in great orchestras, who always longed to write, compose music; in him they see the obstinate, determined repetition of notes and sets in Philip Glass pieces and compositions: couldn't they have done the same?

The answer is they could not have; they stuck to safety, and safety in numbers, and Glass did the innovative plumbing, the daring work, which dared complexity and great simplicity. They stayed in their present, and he moved both backward and forward through plasterboard walls; as they were safely—cashing in on their years of lessons, and wioth the wisdom of the turtle versus the hare, were progressing best by moving steadily, to eventually come to the end of the course as they should, with duty paramount. But they had it wrong, like bad accountants: he, Glass, was actually in the slow now, the very present, charging it with energy long saved-up in him; in the moments of his hands moving over the piano keyboard and making what he wanted to make, *right now,* he was completing a race they never would, a turtle with a hare’s feet.

He was the checker who knew how to move on the chessboard. They were the back rows.

Who had the glass half-full, and the glass half-empty? Philip Glass has it toasting and full now, and every member of an orchestra admires him, or envies him, or perhaps just puzzles over him.

The dutiful orchestra is the conundrum of the doctorate holder: is it applause from the real world, or other doctorates duty-bound, because of their salaries, to create new clones?

The flattest and saddest example is the doctorate who cannot find a teaching position; the institution took his tuition, to regenerate its coffers, but it did not produce someone of startling ability of any sort. I have personally endured writing groups in which doctorates in literature addressed writing projects by making hundreds of identical tiny check marks across a manuscript. And, most alarming, many begin to ape the mannerism, the aloofness.

What are they for? Why, they will say, to show that person liked something wherever the check mark landed; and because they own a doctorate, surely they know what they are doing, though it has the look of tiny chickens having crossed a four-page manuscript in confusion, looking for chicken feed it cannot find.

The check mark can only be an abnegation of duty, in a writing group; the writing group is not an accounting group, or a Jiffy Lube, where the technician has kindly and conscientiously noted any faults or lacks in the car and whether they were addressed, windshield washing fluid and tire pressure, automatic transmission fluids, even a vacuuming of the car or a small topping up of radiator fluid at no charge.

A writer is there to write, and that includes in the margins of the manuscripts: careful or uncareful words scrawled beautifully, with long or short dashes, to the side, or even only one trailing, poignant, an eloquent question mark. The check mark is the stuff of grocery shopping lists, whether it’s in your cart; it’s an ugly but efficient bare minimum; it’s the madness of someone with a decade or student loan payments to make, and nowhere to be found the job they thought the advanced degree guaranteed: a supremacy of position and salary. (The origin of the word salary, of course, is salt: how Roman soldiers were paid at one time, in salt allotments. This all becomes more interesting if you read a very famous book called *Salt,* which described how salt deposits could center whole towns and regions, but that salt also could be a weapon. Salting fields was once a strategy employed in war.)

Instead they find themselves relegated to community writing groups, which to some they begin to describe as “the community of arts and letters.” The codewords for these group are safety and privacy; publishing is to be avoided; that is for the crass, the openly confessional or orating. In other words, they don’t long for excellence or clarity; they long for the basic rights of the musketeers of secreted shame. They don’t write, unless bringing work every three months is described as a learning experience for others and themselves as they checkmark others’ manuscripts; verbally they may tell others how to write, and what is wrong with their punctuation or their grammar or their line-spacing in their drafts. They gratefully describe the group as their church and their therapy. But write or publish, why would they do that? That’s a game best left for assignments, students; they are now paralyzed themselves in the issuing-checkmarks bench of retired students, unwilling to write unless a degree is dangled above them as an enticement.

Check marks! Even issued by a schoolteacher of the very younestg students, it’s a sadism; its tired repetitiveness reminds the poor student who longs for individual attention from his teacher that he or she is only student twenty-three or thirty-one. It says weariness, obligation, salaried and necessary duty, multiplied by however many years that teacher has taught or most likely will teach. It signals the boredom of the teacher, most of all, their gut weariness. And, if it does not imply all these things resoundingly, it certainly says that what the student has done or said or accomplished is but a rote rung of ladder which all are required to climb, and which even the teacher does not wish upon them, that ladder-climbing, but according to certain rules or regulations *must.*

But in a writing group it is worse; it has the click of a cheap pocketbook clasp, the kind designed to alert people you are opening or closing the grand maw of your self-important pocketbook or briefcase. It has the harsh look as the high-heeled shoe in an office setting has a harsh sound the sound designed to tell you the boss is coming, to look attentive in your cubicle.

But, the repetition of those dozens or hundreds of equally tiny (and red-ink) checkmarks—that could be the stuff of Glass, the almost mad, mindless repetition of it, the repeating of it though it defies all polite ideas about musical or narrative or paper-grading progression to a goal. It could be stuff of Glass if it became a piece labeled “The Beauty of the Check Mark.” It could be beautiful if the maker of the check marks could admit the check marks are a longing to be wearing Dorothy’s checked gingham jumper as she skips down The Yellow Brick Road. It could be art if there was a hint of some secret fury built into those checkmarks: perhaps in The Third Reich careful records were kept with just those sorts of checkmarks to indicate life or death in the camps, and the person who has written the check marks is commenting on the futility of all creativity, if such monsters can rise among us, people who want to kill people because their ethniticy or their religion is incorrect.

But it is most likely the person who is tired of others’ writing; and who has no interest in writing his or herself. Why is she or he in the writing group? Because otherwise it would look as if the doctorate was in vain. He must be the approver or the disapprover, the mysterious remote, above even having to clarify her commentary (which might reveal a lack of knowledge, or proof, even, on none). He must be far above the community writing group; he needs, like the schoolteacher of the young, indicate a blaseness, a boredom. Distance, healing to the issuer; punitive for the receiver.

Abd the good writer must uncheck all those boxes, with an essay like this one, to accuse the check-marker of a kind of envy which cannot corrode good silver, or soar to write and compose like Glass, or rise above the erudite trappedness of the large and sad orchestra: I can see, from my chair here, how that can be done. Look at the manuscript as a rise and fall of musical lines, sounds, and depending on the height and placement of each check mark, assign each a a tone of highness or lowness.

Or, make all the notes the exact same sound or register, but make them percussion, interfering with the tune of the piece, with their blank and stolid and thudding interruption. Show an image of Philip Glass now old, his eyes huge and heavy, his large head leaning on one hand. Make the checkmarked manuscript the liner notes for the collection of Glass tunes, and give the check mark maker royalties from the music. Make an opera called The Check Mark Maker, about the office loneliness of that person’s life, how they seek to dissolve themselves in repeated, innocuous symbols.

Show a photograph of the trapped members of an orchestra, having played their hearts out for a piece written by someone else, someone who got to sing out their anguish and confusion and trappedness in life, sing out their dream of rising, some perfect golden brave beach-head of shore above, if they clamber up the bank.

What all writing is, as Fitzgerald said: holding your breath as you fight your way—to reach the surface.And it is—Phlip Glass playing the music which greets you there. Keep the check marks going. I think Philip Glass can make music from anything.