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How to Unread Shelley Jackson ?

Stéphane Vanderhaeghe

- 1 At some point in Shelley Jackson's *Half Life*,¹ the reader comes across a clipping Nora, the narrator, keeps in her "Siamese Twin Reference Manual". In it, Dr. Theodore Gupta—a renowned albeit controversial literary critic defending a theory according to which Shakespeare himself was one of those "conjoined twins" whose existence history has up until now been ashamed of letting everybody know of—appears surprised, not to say hurt, to find out that the boundaries between his literary research and his personal life can be so easily contested and his integrity as a scholar so blatantly challenged. For, contrary to his opponent's expectations, Gupta has no personal axe to grind and is himself no conjoined twin but a "singleton". In retaliation for what he feels is an insult, he raises a challenging question that inevitably resounds as a warning in the mind of Shelley Jackson's reader : "What happened to textual analysis, if I may ask ?" (245) Thus forewarned, one had undoubtedly better eschew any facile answers and rest content with merely formulating questions instead—or trying to—like :
- 2 HOW TO UNREAD SHELLEY JACKSON'S HALF LIFE ?
- 3 a question which would somehow tend to indicate, as a mere preliminary,² that Shelley Jackson's novel barely functions as this old-fashioned object once called a book used to... Well, it is a book all right, or at least bears every external resemblance to what we usually call a "book". As such, the object is tangible enough to let anyone open it and adventurously get lost amid pages (white) covered with ink (black)—pages "stained with words" as Nora will eventually claim. But, naive as the question surely is, does that make it a "book" ? And what, then, is a "book", or what is left of it, in the age of digital manipulation and electronic saturation ? One possible answer is that a "book" is something we can always go back to and find unchanged, its contents there for eternity, forever preserved on a bookshelf somewhere in the library next door ; in that case, then, and despite all contrary evidence, Shelley Jackson's *Half Life* is probably not a book ; for a simple experiential, hence subjective³ reason at least : when the readers reach its last page, they suddenly feel it vanish between their hands, even as they are grasping it, and grasping it tight, to get a reassuring sense of ontological certainty. If Jackson parodically makes use of conventional novelistic devices throughout, it seems

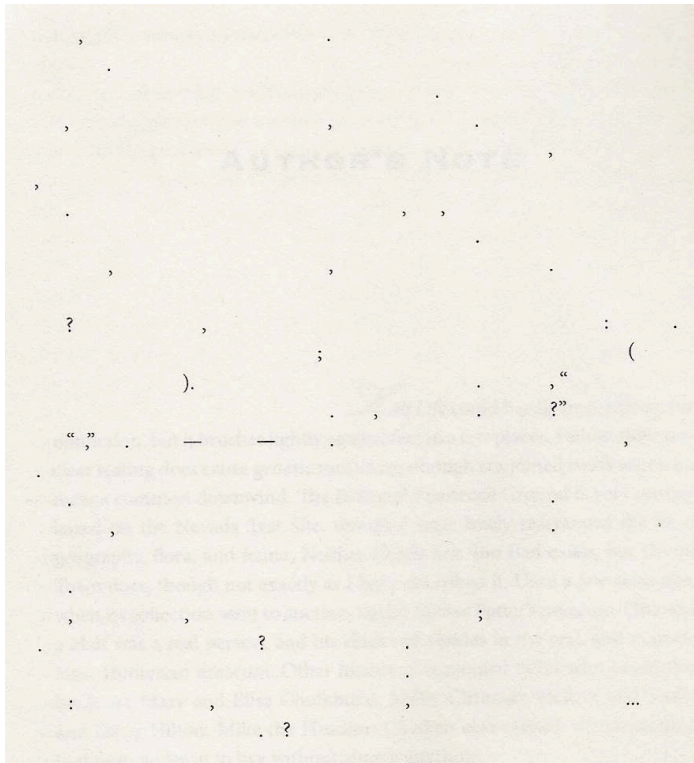
relevant that, among them, the climax that one usually finds towards the end of a well-driven plot is reinterpreted along literal lines. As a metaphor that over the years has become so familiar as to have lost its full, though ambiguous meaning (if full meaning, ambiguous or not, it ever had), the novel's "climax" is here envisioned as an atom bomb exploding. Yet the ending of *Half Life* is not the expected final explosion that would conventionally give birth to its mushroom-cloud of an offspring, but rather its parodic, self-canceling reversal : the bomb, going off, sucks back its offspring off a mushroom-cloud. In other words, one had better follow the (metafictional) suggestion of One and a Half, this two-headed kitten singing songs to Nora, and refer to *Half Life* not as a book in the end, but as a "device" instead which leaves nothing intact, least of all the "text" or the "novel" :

[w]hen the two coils of its bifurcated structure are joined, and Agent White [*i.e.*, Blanche, Nora's twin sister] and Agent Black [*i.e.*, Nora herself] meet in a single point bearing every resemblance to a period or full stop, the Device will, not ex- or implode, but un- or anti- or deplode, restoring the lost sadness to our riven world.
(435)

- 4 Before the text closes in on itself, the reader is thus offered one last reminder as to what the object s/he has in hands may have been in the end : "The mushroom cloud remembers what it had forgotten : the bomb. Things unhappen quickly now". (436) *Half Life*—whose very title⁴ suggests that the process has already started—is an *unbook* that somehow *unwrites* itself, and that, ultimately, the "reader" (whatever that antiquated term refers to) needs to *unread*.

5 * * *

- 6 How, then, to unread a text ? In the course of such hypothetical unreading, the focus will probably have to be on the blank spaces between words, on the silence that slowly permeates the very (un-)writing of the book, on all those hushed-up voices the readers, practicing their new games, will have to listen in on, paying attention to what is left unsaid when and even though there is absolutely no doubt that everything has been told and, what is more, that everything has *already* been told before. The opening of the novel, parodying the opening of *Lolita* by Nabokov, makes it quite explicit ; silence here is the noise on the page, the echoes and intertextual allusions a white page is always already filled with : "Blanche, white night of my dark day. My sister, my self. Blanche : a cry building behind sealed lips, then blowing through. First the pout, then the plosive ; the meow of the vowel ; then the fricative sound of silence. Shhhh".(5) Such opening would suggest that despite the garrulousness of its narrator, *Half Life* remains empty, silent and blank, and it is no wonder as such that the book closes, as a long-delayed echo of its opening, on the stained remains of a blank page :



- 7 Blank, that is, or almost, were it not for the persistence of punctuation marks, “the occasional ding where [the narrator] bore down on a comma or a dash”. (437) The “text” subsides, withdraws, cancels itself out somehow, thus clearing up some space, heeding Molloy’s lead, for still other texts to obliterate... (yes *I will Yes.*)

8 **

- 9 *Half Life* tells of the story or stories, or probably more to the point, of the half-story—or is it half-stories?...—of Nora and Blanche ; Nora and Blanche are Siamese twins, or “conjoined twins” or “twofers” in American slang, “mushies” in British slang : “*Dicephalus dipus dibrachius*. That’s two heads, two legs, and two arms : standard-issue twofer”. (6) Nora, the narrator of the book, is alone, though, for Blanche has been asleep for fifteen years or so and literally is a dead weight on her sister’s shoulders. Nora thus wants to get rid of Blanche and goes in search of the infamous Dr. Decapitate who runs the Unity Foundation, soon to realize that Blanche is not as asleep as she once thought she was ; Blanche is indeed progressively and dangerously waking up, threatening the integrity of both Nora’s life and text. All the while, Nora’s past, of which she only had very dim notions, is slowly resurfacing, and the novel alternates between chapters devoted to Nora’s present quest for singularity and others recounting her childhood with Blanche, both types of chapters being now and then interspersed with extracts from Nora’s “Siamese Twin Reference Manual”.
- 10 As the names of the main half-characters suggest, *Half Life* is structured around a series of binary oppositions that the text stages using the four Boolean operators : right and left, past and present, memory and oblivion, twofers and singletons, Nora and Blanche, and, as it becomes all the clearer as we read along that those two half-characters are but a conjoined metaphor of the book in its material dimensions—the very book, that is, that *Half Life* somehow is *not*—black (the color of Nora’s ink) and white (the color of Blanche’s silent page). The issue is directly addressed by Nora towards the end as she

comes to understand, in an ironic reversal of the dilemma facing Twain in the writing of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*—as Twain explained in his preface to *Those Extraordinary Twins*, “I had not noticed, as yet, that it was two stories in one” (Twain, 183)—that :

I have spent my whole life trying to make one story out of two : my word against Blanche's. But we are only as antithetical as this ink and this page. Do these letters have meaning, or the space around them ? Neither. It's their difference we read.
(433)

- 11 But if *Half Life* blatantly plays with binary oppositions, it perversely aims to collapse the difference between them, calling into question the very possibility of differentiation : “Collapse the difference between Agent White and Agent Black and boom, no Device” (427), as One and a Half would have it, which is exactly what *Half Life* ends up doing in its recursive pattern...

- 12 Another opposition somehow pervades Shelley Jackson's work : that between the actual and the virtual. The writer of two “books” (*The Melancholy of Anatomy*, a collection of stories, and *Half Life*, her first novel), Jackson also is the writer of two hypertexts (*Patchwork Girl* and *my body : A Wunderkammer* ; she co-authored a third one, *The Doll Games*, with her sister), children's stories and a completely virtual text entitled “Skin”. Completely virtual, that is, to anyone unless they decide to turn themselves into words, literally speaking, as “Skin” is a story tattooed on the skin of its readers, its readers thus becoming part and parcel of the story itself, literally embodying it and/or embodied by it, their flesh made word : writing and reading thus merge and become one and the same as Jackson will not let her story out in the open in any conventional form. “Skin” then starts being readable from the moment one somehow *bewords* oneself. As Jackson, tongue-in-cheek, stipulates on her website : ⁵

[Participants] are not understood as carriers or agents of the words they bear, but as their embodiments. As a result, injuries to the printed text, such as dermabrasion, laser surgery, tattoo cover work or the loss of body parts, will not be considered to alter the work. Only the death of words effaces them from the text. As words die the story will change ; when the last word dies the story will also have died. The author will make every effort to attend the funerals of her words.

- 13 The point for Jackson, as the story's subtitle makes clear, is to make of “Skin” “a Mortal Work of Art”. Consequently, such a story is at one and the same time both virtual *and* actual and could not be any more so as it is a story printed on its readers' flesh, a story whose shifty contours are meant to alter as the “text”, as the sum of its words, shifts or dies over time : but, as the saying is, *this is another story...* In any case, in Jackson's work, narrative has become flimsier as it is migrating away from the substantial page, invading the reader's personal and private space (whether literally in “Skin” or metaphorically in *Half Life*). The frontiers one held dear, once upon a time, somehow materialized in this old-fashioned object called a “book” that could be closed and dropped at any time, are thus irremediably collapsing and ruthlessly letting readers down. Symptomatically, the distinctions between diverse oppositions one may have thought absolute are thus no longer tenable ; if, for instance, as the end of *Half Life* reveals in a possible Orwellian echo, black is white and white is black, who can say with any certainty where the shift between those two organizing poles of the narrative occurred ? Who can vouch for the difference, if any, between Nora and Blanche, between subject and object of the narrative, between creature and creator, the “monster”—the “Stitch Bitch” to whom *Patchwork Girl* gave birth and who supposedly invented Shelley Jackson in the first place (that is, if she exists, if she herself is not an

impostor, something besides a parasite, a sort of engorged and loathsome tick hanging off the reader's side...⁶)—or, further perhaps, between the work and its medium ? And who else but the “reader” somehow—whose epitaph Shelley Jackson's work as a whole, and *Patchwork Girl* exemplarily, may be meticulously spelling out, in a possible reminder of Milorad Pavić's opening epigraph in *Dictionary of the Khazars* : “Here lies the reader who will never open this book. He is forever dead”. —painstakingly patching up or salvaging the narrative, what is left of it, piece by piece ? Yet when narrative as such has completed its migration away from the page, what then is one left with, if not blank pages still in need of rewriting and unreading ?...

- 14 In the course of her investigations to get in touch with the Unity Foundation, Nora launches a search on the Internet and finally happens to find an e-mail address. However she wonders :

Why had a search for “circle” brought up that page ? I checked and confirmed that “circle” appeared nowhere on it, but Trey, who had dabbled in Web design, had once said, “There's no such thing as a blank page”, so I checked the source code, and there it was. I found something else, too. Stuck through the tattoo-blue jacquard was an emerald needle with both ends sharpened :

<!-- Seeker, if you are reading this, you already know you have found the
One you were looking for. --> (130)

- 15 “There's no such thing as a blank page”. It is rather difficult to know what Trey, Nora's roommate, means by this apparently unequivocal sentence ; but the point, if point to be made there is, may precisely be that a blank page is always ambiguous, the silent witness of something there and not yet there. Not only is a blank page non-existent, but in its non-existence, it is unsurpassable (there's no *such* thing as a blank page). It seems that *Half Life* covets the blankness of the page, as though writing were not so much concerned with blackening the page as erasing it, or rubbing it clean. Intertextuality seems to be a privileged way of doing this, as Nora's practice consists throughout in erasing, that is extracting from her text. The novel's opening is thus doubly a quotation, since it directly refers to Nabokov's *Lolita* on the one hand, but is also, on the other, what remains after Nora has erased her own text, extracted or, in a sense, quoted, albeit negatively, from it : “‘Blanche,’ I wrote. ‘Dark day of my bright night.’ Then I crossed that out and started over”. (335) As such, a blank page is already filled with someone else's language, a negative quote or extract *from* ; a blank page may then be the very quintessence of quotation, as Nora's quote from Melville's *The Confidence-Man* suggests, which has conscientiously and scrupulously been replicated here, word for blank word for blank :

- 16 **The above—Nora explains in one of her notebooks—represents a full paragraph from The Confidence-Man, Melville, in which, meticulously, only the blank spaces have been underlined.* (356)

17 *

- 18 Because she favors rewriting—that is, like Nora : “Then I crossed everything out, making each word unreadable by writing a succession of other words on top of it. Then, for good measure, I threw the page away”. (311)—there seems to be an appeal in Shelley Jackson's work for ephemerality. If not truly mortal, as “Skin” might be, the text is nevertheless fragile, never quite what it seems to be, always gnawed at by some malevolent virus, so to speak, as in the story “Cancer” from *The Melancholy of Anatomy*.

The narrator of “Cancer” has to face the invasion of his/her private sphere by a cancer that slowly grows in the middle of his/her living room, until s/he realizes that s/he was expecting the cancer

behind every conversation : a lure, a magnet. I sought to avoid it and discovered myself summoning it up. My conversations were all evasion and omission : I hid things that had nothing to do with the cancer, but that I thought might, in the end, lead me back to the cancer, which was therefore not just a cancer in the world, but a cancer in language, a ruined area where nothing normal could come to pass. (Jackson, 2002, 62)

- 19 The text eventually seems as ruined as what the narrator describes, full of holes, missing parts and missing links, as a second voice, whose origin is unclear, infiltrates the text just as the cancer had appeared in the narrator’s living room “sometime between eleven and three on a Thursday”. (Jackson, 2002, 57) At least, the narrator is quite honest about it all, as s/he claims at the very beginning : “I suffer from bouts of migraine, and sometimes I miss things, or see things that aren’t there” (Jackson, 2002, 57). Maybe the cancer is one of those things, maybe the cancer is not there, or only is in the eyes of the beholder ; maybe, then, the cancer is in the way one reads such texts as one, as suddenly, intrudes upon them, projecting meaning onto them when there was none before : for surely, one thinks, this cancer *means* something, there must be some purpose to it ; in the words of the narrator : “The cancer waxed stronger every day, every tendril a tine, metallic and purposeful”. (Jackson, 2002, 63) But what if it did not mean anything or served no purpose ? Just like the diseased little girl living next-door, the cancer remains obtuse to the very end, resists every assault on both the narrator’s and reader’s parts, leaving the narrator guilty and ashamed after s/he tried to dislodge it with an axe : “There was no epochal shift, no grind of planets swerving in their spheres. I was still guilty, perhaps I had always been guilty, in advance, for this moment”. (Jackson, 2002, 68) And so is the reader, to some extent, who keeps expecting a “text”, a purposeful and meaningful text that, in advance of everything anyone could come to say about it, forever turns them into ashamed *voyeurs* of something bare and utterly devoid of intentions. The only thing that can apparently still be done in the end is to read and reread, again and again, looking for, waiting or hoping for the text, a text, *any* text. But the story “Dildo” makes it quite clear that the text offered to the reader is—a bit like a dildo somehow, as the main object, or so its title implies, of the story—a mere appendage/appendix to *the* text that happens to be eventually left out of the book ; for not only is the reader supposed to have mere excerpts—“excerpts from : A DISCOURSE CONCERNING DILDOES” (Jackson, 2002, 82)—but the story *as such* has again literally been *extracted* from the text that gives it shape, in the form of an absence or, so to speak, a textual proxy embodied in this “epilogue” that constitutes or makes up for a negated or negative text, here offered somehow as an attempt to fill in the blank.

20 * *

- 21 To put it again in the terms of the person narrating “Cancer”, Shelley Jackson’s stories seem to be constructed around a series of “evasion and omission”. *Half Life* is no exception, as Nora’s writing practice does not consist so much in imprinting the page as in rubbing it clean :

I rub and rub. I try writing a little. Then I take it back. I’ve written pages on this line alone. [...] The blank spaces aren’t just empty. They’re stained with words I’ve taken back. Sometimes the same word is reinstated, then revoked again. This book has been so much erased that its larger part, like an iceberg’s, is invisible. I begin to feel

that *that* is the real book. The words you are actually reading are just a sort of erased erasing, a cautiously omitted omission.(354-5)

- 22 But here's the "rub": Nora can't help feeling that her private space—namely the pages she started out blackening in the first place—is, like the narrator's in "Cancer", being invaded: "I can't shake the feeling that someone's reading over my shoulder." (345) "I never thought she would turn up here, on the page. In my private place".(346) Hence, she starts fantasizing about a pure white page, envisioning diverse approaches:

MAXIMUM SECURITY STRATEGIES [...]:

1. To write what I do not understand in a language I do not know, applying a code that has no key, then erase, overwrite, again erase, tear up, selectively perforate, rearrange, and burn the result, then hide the ashes in a place I cannot find.

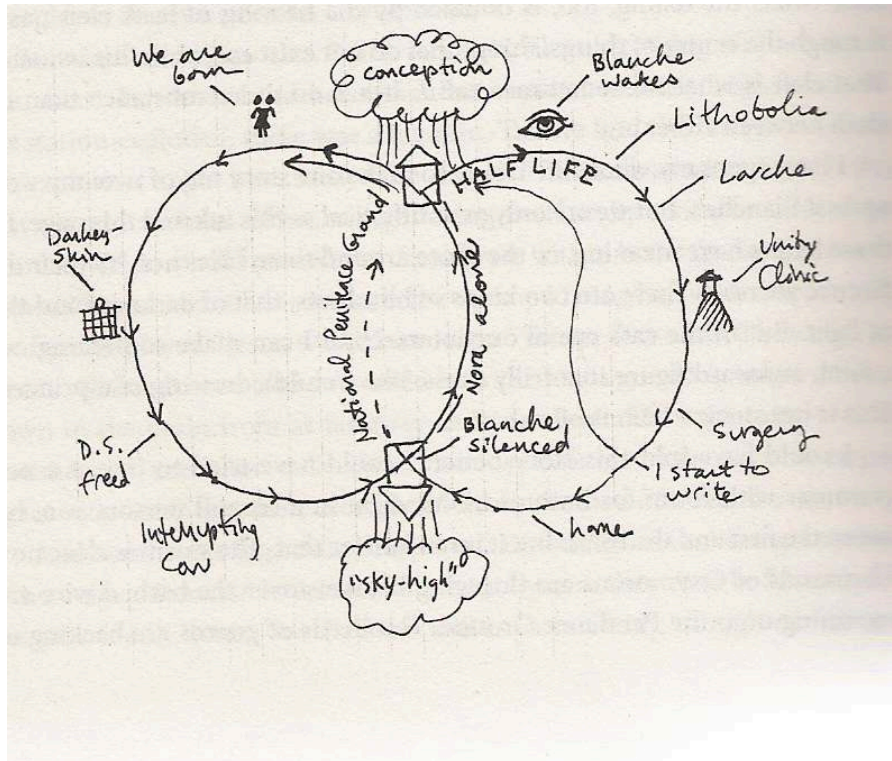
2. To not write.

Frankly, I am discouraged. (351)

- 23 Incidentally, this inaccessible blank page is, as her name indicates, Blanche's private place. By rubbing her half-story out, Nora somehow writes herself out of the book, erases herself. So much so that, if her enterprise can be seen as a way of forging an *I* for herself and herself alone, the first person singular that has been denied her since her birth, it becomes clearer and clearer throughout the text that "I is *not* another"—"*je n'est pas un autre*", but rather, almost anagramatically, *je est une rature...* Writing, for Nora, and to some degree for Shelley Jackson too, has become "the erasing game", a game in which the *I* is a mere absence. This idea ultimately dawns on Nora who says at the end of *Half Life*, giving her reader a role to play in all this:

Everything happens twice, first in the fact, and then in the telling. At least twice: the telling, too, is doubled by the hearing of it. A cleft passes through the center of things, things that do not exist except in this twinship. That cleft is what we sometimes call *I*. It has no more substance than the slash between either and or. (433)

- 24 It is probably this whole either/or logic that *Half Life* repudiates in favor of the *and* that, interestingly enough in the quotation, has superseded the *slash* in question. *And* is, in Jackson's structuring Boolean logic, the intersection set of a Venn diagram on which *Half Life* is modeled:



(434)

- 25 And, the intersection set between both circles, is also what somehow *slashes* the book open, the “cleft” Nora is speaking of, this patch of blankness that separates—reflecting them in the mirror of each other, thus simultaneously *in-* or *un-*differentiating them—one page from the other, right from left, black from white, Nora’s side of the book from Blanche’s, ironically left unpaginated—blank ; this vacancy is what somehow articulates the whole text and finally absorbs it, leaving its readers with the sullied whiteness, blankness of the last page : “I look down and see that my ballpoint has been sponged clean by the wet paper. The page is blank, except for the occasional ding where I bore down on a comma or a dash. But I can read it perfectly”. (437) Which is no wonder considering that the narrator is now almost literally lodged in this blankness : “I scribble until the ink comes. I want to go back and fill in the gaps. But somewhere in the house, someone is speaking. ‘Nora ?’ I say”.(437) This is how the book ends, or rather, as *One and a Half* had suggested, *un-*ends, still waiting in turn to be *un-*read—for one to retrace, that is, to erase the unlocatable origin, or point of departure, of this ironic shift.

26 ***

- 27 Deprived of any substance, inventing *myself* as *I* read, invented by the text *I* shaped, reading along, in the shape of a blank, in the shape of an *I*, *I* myself have somehow looped *my* loop, about ready to follow in *my* own footsteps, and double or duplicate *my* reading, again, making of this pseudo-loop a loop-hole. For *I* still have to acknowledge the vacancy of the text, its blanks that, perforating it, somehow hold it together. *I* too remember now what *I*, in the absence that pervades *me*, the cleft that constitutes *me*, had somehow forgotten : that “one would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery”. (Beckett, 13) This is also, or seems to be—for who am *I* to establish anything with any certainty ?—one conclusion that Nora draws for herself as she progressively erases,

obliterates, *obliterases*, the blackened pages of her textual self. Beckett's characters thus momentarily leave the margins of Nora's text as though to blank it out : "Something flame-colored crosses the window pane in triplicate. It's Molloy, Malone, the Unnamable, swimming in air". (436) Beckett's trilogy thus condemns *Half Life*'s spurious binarism. Nora has written herself out of the text, unless *I*, reading, have *unwritten* her out of it somehow, thus giving way to Blanche and this new writing/reading experience, essentially defined by what the text is *not* ; the *not*, maybe, from the Boolean logic that opens the text, created by the *and* on which it closes and which constantly starts it all over again : "AND is the pain that causes NOT, the flaw in NOT that permits XOR, the compassion that brokers XOR's truce in OR, the love of OR for OR that ends in AND". (386) In other words, what started as a negation—Nora said very early : "It could be that this book is just another way of saying no". (43) Perhaps, *unwritten* under Molloy, minus an O (minus nothing), is Joyce's Molly and her final *yes I will Yes* at the end of *Ulysses*, as Nora's negative or "blanched" counterpart whose text is contrarily blackened almost to saturation, were it not for the absence of punctuation marks ; those, perhaps, that Nora/Blanche, obliterating the text in the end, ironically reintroduce(s)—the initial negation has, in the course of the text's reversibility or self-cancellation, become its own paradoxical perpetuation (*on*), the looping of its loop ; a Venn diagram ; the infinity symbol ; a Moebius strip too, that forever turns the text into its own negative, in the photographic sense of the word, where obviously what is white is black, and black is white. As it should be. Again.

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NOTES

1. First published in 2006 by HarperCollins.
 2. Or, to be accurate, the doubling of a preliminary. Nora, the narrator of Jackson's novel, is right: "Everything happens twice [...]. At least twice"; as a consequence, not only are those lines a mere preliminary to a text that, the reader will hopefully come to understand, is condemned by its very object to remain unwritten, but they merely echo and cautiously redouble a former attempt at critical erasure: <http://www.unicaen.fr/mrsh/lisa/publications/023/11Vanderhaeghe.pdf>
 3. Gupta: "Facts! Facts! Facts! [...] Does Beethoven believe in notes? I make facts sing: glissandos, melismas, arpeggios, trills! 'But—' 'For footnotes, I substitute grace notes!'" (246)
 4. As made explicit by Nora: "Half-life: the time it takes for half the atoms in a radioactive substance to decay." (314-5)
 5. www.ineradicablestain.com
 6. Cf. "Stitch Bitch: the patchwork girl": <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/jackson.html>
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ABSTRACTS

This article aims at examining the activity of reading as it is precisely questioned by Shelley Jackson's novel, *Half Life*. Playing on binary oppositions and twinning, the text undoes itself as it displays its attraction to blankness and erasure.

Cet article s'intéresse à la lecture comme activité telle que la remet en question le roman de Shelley Jackson, *Half Life*. Par un jeu sur les oppositions binaires et la gémellité, le texte se défait en tendant vers le blanc et l'effacement.

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Mots-clés: blanc, effacement, *Half Life*, lecture, négatif, récit, Shelley Jackson

Keywords: blank, erasure, *Half Life*, narrative, negative, reading, Shelley Jackson

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