

Formes poétiques contemporaines

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**Formes
Poétiques
Contemporaines**

L'Effacement

Numéro publié sous la direction de
Michel Delville et Gérald Purnelle

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Éditorial

L'effacement en poésie peut être décliné de manières diverses et plurielles. Il peut être le fruit d'un travail de révision d'une œuvre en gestation ou le résultat d'une manipulation, voire de défiguration, d'une œuvre existante. Dans le premier cas, il s'apparente à un travail d'amélioration du texte placé sous le signe de la concision, de la contraction et de la compacité garantes de la qualité et de la puissance du texte. Dans le second, il se manifeste tantôt comme une forme d'excision textuelle (on songe, par exemple, au travail effectué par Ezra Pound sur *The Waste Land* de T.S. Eliot), tantôt sous la forme d'une réécriture du texte source visant à le débarrasser d'une partie de son contenu et de sa forme afin d'en altérer les mécanismes formels et sémantiques.

Depuis un demi-siècle, on assiste à un véritable âge d'or de ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler la « poétique de l'effacement ». Les exemples envisagés dans ce numéro témoignent de la richesse et de la diversité méthodologique et conceptuelle de cette pratique singulière qui, le plus souvent, se démarque des oppositions entre transparence expressive et opacité matérielle au profit d'une écriture qui met l'accent sur les mécanismes de production du sens.

La question de l'effacement se doit d'être examinée dans sa relation aux formes ainsi détournées, oblitérées, gommées et/ou défigurées. Par ailleurs, si l'on s'en réfère aux distinctions établies par Gérard Genette dans *Palimpsestes* (1982), les pratiques d'effacement relèvent assurément d'un procédé de transformation (et non d'imitation). Cela étant, les régimes (ludique, satirique ou sérieux) varient, de sorte que l'on trouvera probablement des effacements parmi les parodies (ludiques), les travestissements (satiriques) et les transpositions (sérieuses), particulièrement, en ce qui concerne ces dernières, dans les procédés de versification, de prosification, de transmétrisation, et surtout de réduction (coupure, censure, auto-censure, contraction ou résumé).

Enfin, les articles proposés dans ce volume s'attachent à rapprocher l'effacement d'autres formes de réécriture et de sur-écriture s'inscrivant dans une tendance plus large et de plus en plus prisée par certains poètes contemporains : l'on songe, par exemple, au *found text*, aux techniques du *cut-up* et du *writing-through* (W.S. Burroughs, John Cage, Jackson MacLow...) ou aux dispositifs post-mallar-

méens plus récemment mobilisés par Ronald Johnson (*RADI OS* [1977]) ou Travis Macdonald (*The O Mission Repo* [2008]).

Michel Delville, Gérard Purnelle

La revue *Formes poétiques contemporaines* a été fondée en 2002 par un groupe de chercheurs français et belges. Après une première série de quatre numéros (2003–2006) et un numéro double intermédiaire, la gestion de la revue a été reprise par une nouvelle équipe internationale (États-Unis, Canada, France, Belgique); elle est devenue bilingue et a produit une deuxième série de six livraisons (2010–2016). *FPC* est maintenant à l'aube d'une troisième vie : une relocalisation en Europe, une nouvelle maison d'édition (les Presses universitaires de Liège), une équipe refondée dans la continuité (puisqu'elle est composée de membres des première et deuxième périodes et de nouveaux collaborateurs).

Le programme de *Formes poétiques contemporaines* reste tout entier inscrit dans son titre : la revue a pour but d'étudier la *poésie* dans sa dimension *formelle*, en se consacrant à l'époque contemporaine, conçue comme s'étendant à la totalité des XX^e et XXI^e siècles, avec une priorité non exclusive aux poètes vivants. Elle consacrera des dossiers thématiques à des questions formelles, générales ou plus techniques. Elle accueille des articles de réflexions, d'analyse scientifique et des contributions, créatives ou non, des poètes eux-mêmes.

La forme en poésie est une question amplement débattue, voire controversée. Tout en restant *a priori* ouverte à toute conception de la forme, la revue *FPC* conçoit celle-ci comme ressortissant à l'ensemble des plans qui relèvent de la dimension linguistique, infra-linguistique et/ou visuelle du texte, et qui se prêtent à l'observation et à la description méthodiques. Ce spectre ouvert mais clairement défini inclut d'abord la métrique et le vers, la typographie et la page, mais aussi la langue, la syntaxe et le lexique, ainsi que certains secteurs de la rhétorique, enfin les relations qu'entretiennent ces différents plans. La ligne générale de la revue sera de partir de ces aspects formels pour analyser les productions contemporaines dans une perspective de poétique synchronique ou historique, portant sur diverses questions telles que l'innovation, les procédés d'écriture, les enjeux de lecture ou de réception, les courants, etc. Un accent prioritaire sera donné à l'étude des pratiques formelles des poètes.

Formes poétiques contemporaines est une revue qui entend conserver et entretenir sa spécificité, à la croisée des questionnements fondamentaux qui nourrissent l'analyse du phénomène poétique, avec pour crédo le principe selon lequel c'est la forme qui définit d'abord et surtout le poème.

FPC se veut également un lieu d'échange, de découverte et de dialogue; c'est pourquoi ses pages sont ouvertes aux poètes. Ceux-ci sont invités à proposer des

contributions consistant en un ou plusieurs poèmes présentant un aspect formel spécifique, méritant d'être décrite et commentée, et/ou en une réflexion personnelle sur un des thèmes proposés ou un thème libre¹.

Comité de rédaction de *Formes Poétiques Contemporaines* :

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1. La longueur des contributions des poètes ne doit pas dépasser 25000 signes.

L'Effacement

Effacement ou prélèvement ?

Francis Édeline
Université de Liège

L'ensemble de réflexions dans lequel ce texte s'insère a pour thème *Une poétique de l'effacement*. Choisir un texte et en effacer une partie implique cependant d'en épargner la partie complémentaire. Cette opération unique a donc à la fois un aspect négatif qui est une *oblitération* (partielle ou totale) et un aspect positif qui est une *sélection* ou un *prélèvement*. L'une comme l'autre a des implications sur le sens de l'œuvre : ce qu'on supprime peut être aussi significatif que ce qu'on conserve. Le corpus examiné ci-après ne fait pas strictement partie de la poésie visuelle mais témoigne d'un esprit d'expérimentation qui a mené à son intégration dans les anthologies qui la présentent. L'idée elle-même n'est pas neuve et on en trouve témoignage dans un passé parfois lointain. Dans ce vaste corpus on peut en effet relever un nombre significatif de textes qui systématisent ce procédé, au point qu'on peut le considérer comme un genre à part entière, relevant d'une technique spécifique, au même titre que, par exemple, le calligramme, le poème sémiotique ou le rébus. La technique se révélera nettement envisagée, par les auteurs, du point de vue du prélèvement plutôt que de l'effacement.

Le texte-source

À l'époque où se développait le mouvement concrétiste, ou plus généralement visuel et expérimental, prévalait une théorie esthétique développée par Abraham Moles et ensuite par Max Bense. Ce dernier, autour de qui s'est formé le *Groupe de Stuttgart*, était l'auteur d'un ouvrage qui formulait et expérimentait les points essentiels de cette théorie : *Einführung in die informations-theoretische Ästhetik*. Bense lui-même nous fournira des exemples de prélèvement, mais je soulignerai d'abord un des concepts-clés de sa théorie : le répertoire. Pour lui toute œuvre se construit à l'aide d'éléments prélevés dans un répertoire déterminé, discret, délimité et sélectionnable (*i.e.* on peut n'en prendre qu'une partie), même si on le pense parfois comme illimité. Bense formule alors cette règle importante (mais discutable car elle semble interdire l'innovation) : « *Im allgemeinen gilt der repertoiretheoretische Grundsatz, dass das hergestellte Objekt*

sein materiales Repertoire *nicht transzendiert und dass die semantische Dimension seiner Realisation durch das semanteme Repertoire determiniert wird.* » Plus loin on apprend que si l'innovation est néanmoins possible, c'est en faisant passer le répertoire, de son état pré-ordonné, déséquilibré et chaotique, à un état ordonné innovatif qui est celui d'objet esthétique, où la distribution des probabilités obéit à un schéma délibérément choisi. *Répertoire*, *sélection* et *mise en ordre* sont trois concepts qui décrivent en effet fort bien l'opération de prélèvement. Le *répertoire* sera notre texte-source, dont la dimension peut varier considérablement : un mot, une phrase, une page, un livre entier. La *sélection* des éléments à retenir dans ce répertoire pourra s'opérer de diverses manières. Et enfin on rencontrera plusieurs modes de (re)*mise en ordre*. C'est l'ensemble de ces composantes qui confèrera à l'œuvre finale son ton¹ particulier.

Les techniques d'extraction

Le poète qui envisage cette méthode de création peut extraire de la source qu'il a choisie un nombre variable d'unités, elles-mêmes de dimension variable. Il peut en outre respecter ou non l'ordre et l'adjacence de ces unités dans la source. Le résultat, et le ton même du procédé, dépend étroitement du choix adopté. Les unités peuvent aller, en dimension, du fragment de graphème au syntagme entier. On conçoit que le rapport entre le nombre d'éléments prélevés et l'étendue du répertoire dans lequel ils peuvent être prélevés sera une mesure de la difficulté et de la rentabilité de l'opération : plus ce nombre est petit plus l'opération est facile et proche de la trivialité, et inversement. À la limite, il est *toujours possible* d'obtenir un mot désiré en prélevant des lettres isolées dans un réservoir suffisamment grand.

Quelques exemples montreront la diversité des méthodes adoptées ainsi que la nature des résultats escomptés.

À partir d'un livre entier

✿ Le poète Ecossais Thomas A. Clark a publié en 1979 un petit livre intitulé *A Ruskin Sketchbook*, suivi bientôt en 1980 par *Ways through Bracken*. Le premier exploite une anthologie des traités d'esthétique de John Ruskin (*A Ruskin Miscellany*), dont il extrait de courts syntagmes, puis les dispose en colonne sans y rien changer ni ajouter. Un tel mode de composition soulève aussitôt l'intéressant problème de savoir ce qui fait d'un texte anodin un poème : Jean Cohen a soutenu naguère que le découpage y suffit. C'est ce qu'illustre fort bien l'exemple suivant tiré de la section *The Material of Ornament* :

1. J'adopte ici le terme « ton » dans le sens défini par René Nelli (1947), de préférence à « éthos », « style », « atmosphère », « coloration », « effet », etc.

into
the tiniest
stamen

the commandment
is written

⌘

continence
at the root
the rest is
liberty

Le second livre fait de même avec un célèbre et populaire guide de randonnée consacré au *Lake District*, calligraphié et illustré par Alfred Wainwright. L'intervention du poète se limite à une disposition en créneaux :

There is nothing
may be said
One looks east
and the heart is soothed
West
and it is stirred

Il n'apparaîtra pas nécessairement au lecteur français que bien des poèmes de Clark se basent sur un matériel linguistique préexistant (une formule magique celte, une chanson populaire, une citation, un proverbe...), un peu gauchi mais préservé en tant que générateur automatique d'un ton ou d'une atmosphère.

À propos de ces poèmes, pour lui très anciens, Tom Clark m'écrit :

My poems were brief notations taken by reading down a page rather than across, just reacting to the language. My attempt was to find a freshness of language, something happening there that I could not have put there!

"Work" seems not the right word. [...] it was a reaction or a response.

My first attempts to work in this way were in Some Particulars, [...], in a section called Excavations. The sense was of stripping away the surrounding language to find something buried in the discursive flow.

[...]

Thinking again [...] about the old process of "excavation", I wonder if it is really so different from how we always work in poetry. After all, the very notion of poetry is a pre-text that any poet carves into, working with and against a long history of what other poets have done. And further back again, or more intimately, there is language itself, how it has accumulated, what it allows and what it contains. Any poem will be a cutting away or carving into the body of language with or against the grain.

et il conclut qu'il a abandonné cette technique parce que le résultat ne lui paraissait pas à la hauteur de son attente.

Les deux exemples suivants sont d'un tout autre type.

✿ Les textes générés par ordinateur, dont Max Bense cite un des premiers exemples — celui publié dès 1959 par Theo Lutz et fabriqué à partir du vocabulaire du *Château* de Kafka et d'une syntaxe rudimentaire — cherchent eux aussi à extraire d'une source une sorte de moelle spécifique, dont la nature exacte reste inanalysée :

Nicht jeder Blick ist nah. Kein Dorf ist spät.
 Ein Schloss ist frei und jeder Bauer ist fern.
 Jeder Fremde ist fern. Ein Tag ist spät.
 Jedes Haus ist dunkel. Ein Auge ist tief.
 Nicht jedes Schloss ist alt. Jeder Tag ist alt.

C'est peut-être la gaucherie et le côté litanique de ces courtes phrases qui les rend si mystérieuses et attirantes, sans qu'on puisse échapper à la question : d'où parle cette voix ? Or cette gaucherie résulte de la nature fruste de la technique d'extraction, et plus encore du côté élémentaire de la syntaxe employée pour générer les textes. Des mots ordinaires doués de sens sont assemblés par une syntaxe arbitraire : c'est ce qui explique à la fois leur familiarité et leur étrangeté.

Bense (p. 112) se montre parfaitement lucide dans son appréciation des textes générés par ordinateur : il ne s'agit pas de *poésie* mais de *poésie simulée*, ce pourquoi il préfère employer l'expression *texte synthétique*. Bien que ces procédures fassent usage d'un matériel linguistique (lequel conserve son sens à travers le processus), le sens des textes produits, ce qu'ils semblent exprimer, n'est engendré qu'à la fin lors de leur interprétation par un récepteur. Autrement dit il n'y a en eux aucune intentionnalité, ce qui les exclut de la poésie... mais ils prennent leur sens lors d'une interprétation, ce qui les en rapproche. La question de l'intentionnalité s'avère ainsi cruciale pour l'analyse des œuvres produites par prélèvement.

Bien entendu les moyens de calcul ont fort progressé depuis cette époque, et les chercheurs d'aujourd'hui peuvent se mesurer à des entreprises plus ambitieuses. C'est le cas des œuvres de Jules Verne (ou de Shakespeare, ou de Saussure, ou de Bram Stoker, ou de Mary Shelley...) traitées par le Groupe bruxellois ALGOLIT¹, qui ne recule pas devant la création de mots (et non simplement de phrases) :

1. Le groupe de travail Algolit fait partie de Constant <http://constantvzw.org>. : CHARNN, Algolit, Constant, 2017. Les textes sont en Copyleft, selon les termes de la Licence Art Libre <http://www.artlibre.org>.

Et maintenant. Europes d'areures, dont la frontière du Tarryani, en Europe, annonçant, déployée à la marée ressemblait d'une tafale théorique. Mais un cri enthoyait avec l'éclipse droite. Une demi-excellence d'Urville où comme une journée de la spiralle de Joe qui se considérait les pachydermes de ces journaux que je répondais que la partie innône naturait. Je regagnai la chevelure de sa robustiees. Ce consulta le baromètre. Il n'avait réverser de deux cent mille pieds conçues, qui voudra là-h. Maston du place du J.-T. Maston se reminent. Deux mètres sous les pêcheurs, des voisines, soigneusement émlé-fieurs, les efforts d'une budsité de certaines personnes. Là, pour cela naturel savoir eu à la plaine sur l'homme pour ta superficie.

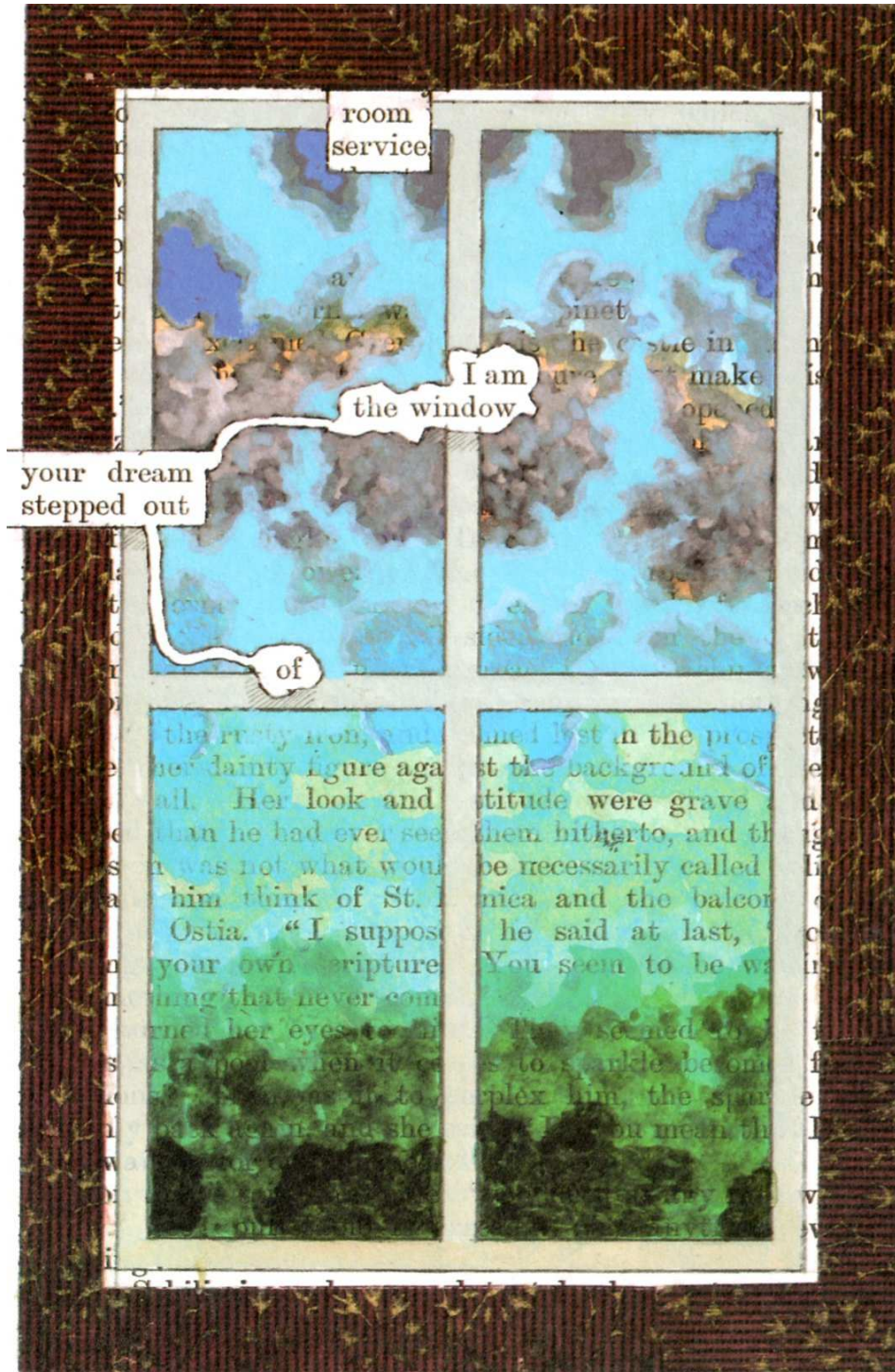
Néanmoins on voit qu'une syntaxe véritable fait toujours défaut et est remplacée par des probabilités de transition (chaînes markoviennes), sans faire intervenir le champ sémantique des mots.

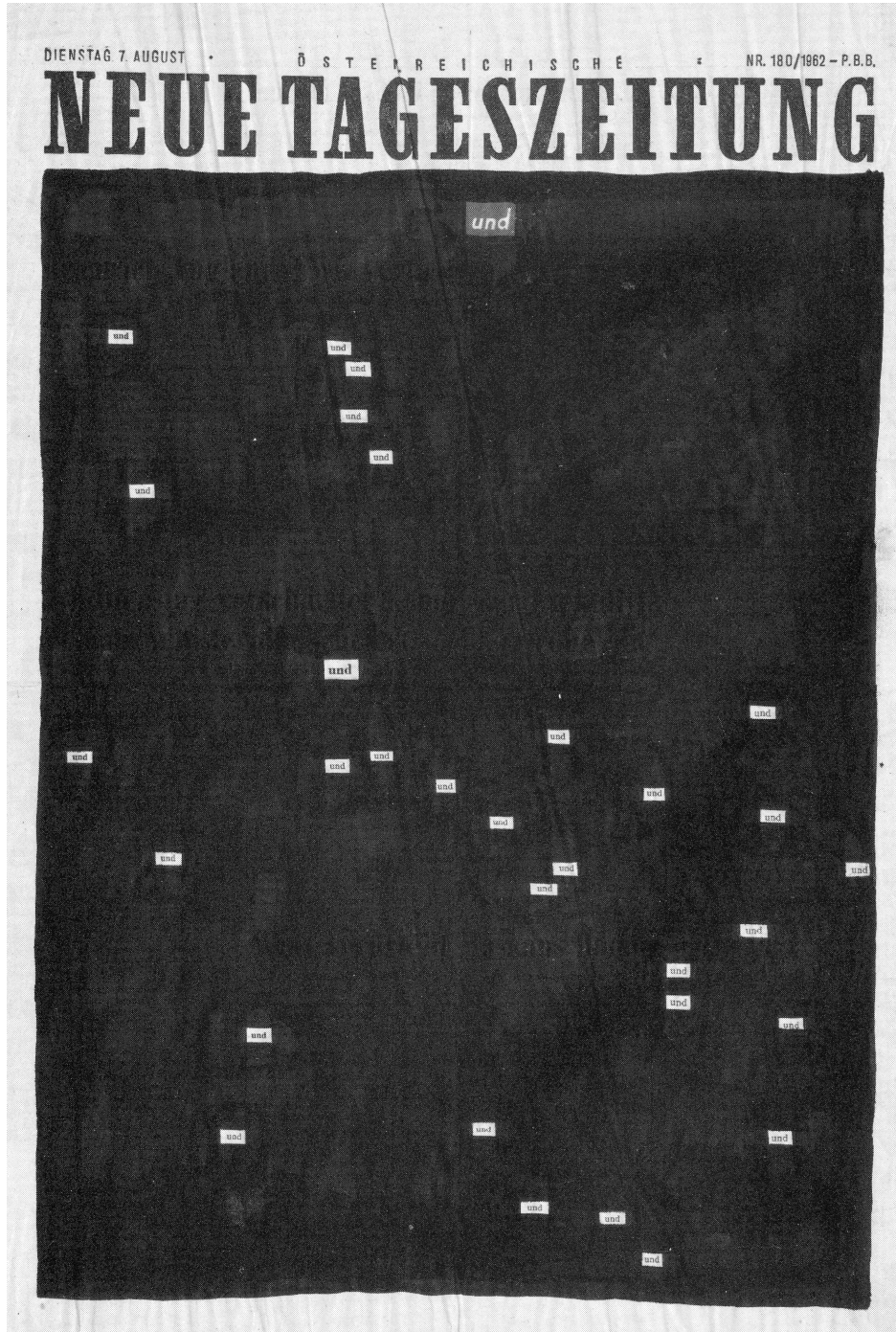
À partir d'une page isolée

✿ Dans son œuvre *A HUMUMENT*, Tom Phillips traite, page par page, le roman victorien de Mallock *A human Document* qui en compte 367. En règle générale il sélectionne dans chaque page quelques lettres, fragments de mots ou mots entiers, qu'il assemble en les entourant de blanc (tout simplement en soulignant les blancs intercalaires normaux du texte) pour en faire un nouveau texte. La surface restante est utilisée par Phillips pour une création personnelle, le plus souvent une gouache. La partie sélectionnée dans le texte-source s'élève en moyenne à un mot sur quinze (6,7 %), mais peut varier de 2 à 100 mots sur une page qui en comporte 400 à 500.

L'entreprise est en fait extrêmement complexe et comporte des aspects qui ne se retrouvent nulle part ailleurs. Par exemple, dans nombre de pages (dont celle illustrée, la page 98), il n'efface pas complètement le texte non retenu : ce texte est simplement raturé, ou recouvert d'un voile de couleur transparente, donc plus ou moins difficilement lisible mais néanmoins présent. Il est à présumer, dans ce dernier cas, que le lecteur n'est pas supposé le lire : on lui rappelle seulement qu'il le pourrait, qu'il y a un texte en arrière-plan, mais dont la lisibilité s'atténue, notamment du fait de son éloignement dans le temps. Apparaît alors ce phénomène curieux : l'œuvre parle à deux voix simultanées !

Les deux parties de la page (les mots prélevés chez Mallock et l'aquarelle de Phillips qui recouvre la surface restante) sont en étroite relation. Le mot *window* a induit la représentation d'une fenêtre, à travers laquelle le spectateur aperçoit confusément, comme dans un rêve (le *dream* de Mallock), à la fois un paysage et le texte à demi oblitéré de Mallock. La subtilité est poussée jusqu'à rendre ambigu le *you*, qui peut aussi bien désigner le personnage du roman que prendre à partie le lecteur-spectateur du livre de Phillips.





Page 366 de *The Humument*, le nom de Guillaume Apollinaire est construit lettre par lettre ce qui, comme le montre un calcul élémentaire¹, se révèle trop facile. Aussi pour éviter la banalité qui résulterait de cette simplicité exagérée, Phillips cherche le plus souvent des blocs plus ou moins cohérents, des *clusters* significatifs. Ces blocs, résultant d'une proximité non voulue par Mallock et pouvant signifier tout autre chose que ce qu'il avait prévu, font l'effet d'heureuses rencontres, de surprises révélatrices.

L'artiste s'est exprimé lui-même sur l'esprit dans lequel il travaillait, invoquant le bricolage lévi-straussien d'une part, et le souci honorable, pour un plasticien, de n'intervenir que selon une technique qu'il maîtrise, laissant à un expert la confection des textes : ce sont, dit-il, « les poèmes d'un non-poète ». Pointe ici aussi un souci de recyclage.

✿ Gerhard Rühm s'est livré à un travail d'occultation plutôt que d'extraction, en cachant, sur la première page du journal autrichien *Neue Tageszeitung*, tout le texte à l'exception du mot *und*. Six de ces pages ont été publiées, et sans surprise le mot *und* y abonde. L'intention polémique est manifeste : il s'agit de déclarer inintéressants et interchangeable les potins quotidiens et de souligner, dans leur enchaînement, le rôle cancanier de la gazette que rend si bien l'expression familière *et patati et patata*.

À partir d'un poème entier

T.A. Clark propose, dans son recueil *some particulars* (1971) trois chansons d'après Robert Herrick. Je présente ici la première en regard de son texte-source, programmatique du livre entier (*The Argument of his Book*) et dont n'est conservé que le premier mot de chaque vers. On pourrait s'attendre à ce qu'il ne reste rien du poème original mais c'est tout le contraire.

| | |
|----|--|
| I | I sing of Brooks, of Blossomes, Birds, and Bowers : |
| Of | Of April, May, of June, and July-Flowers. |
| I | I sing of May-poles, Hock-carts, Wassails, Wakes, |
| Of | Of Bride-grooms, Brides, and of their Bridall-cakes. |
| I | I write of Youth, of Love, and have Accesse |
| By | By these, to sing of cleanly-Wantonnesse. |
| I | I sing of Dewes, of Raines, and piece by piece |
| Of | Of Balme, of Oyle, of Spice, and Amber-Greece. |
| I | I sing of Times trans-shifting ; and I write |

1. Compte tenu de la fréquence statistique des diverses lettres, on peut calculer leur probabilité d'occurrence sur une page de 2646 signes. Il suffit alors de calculer combien de fois cela permet de former le nom de Guillaume Apollinaire sur une seule page : 37 fois en anglais. Quant à Wilhelm Apollinaris de KOSTROWITZKY, il ne peut être formé que deux fois en anglais vu la lettre limitante Z... et aucune fois en français à cause des lettres limitantes K et W.

| | |
|-----|---|
| How | How Roses first came Red, and Lillies White |
| I | I write of Groves, of Twilights, and I sing |
| The | The Court of Mab, and of the Fairie-King. |
| I | I write of Hell : I sing (and ever shall) |
| Of | Of Heaven, and hope to have it after all. |

Ce poème est rigoureusement construit sur des découpes et des alternances, moulées sous la forme de 7 distiques strictement parallèles. Cette ossature vertébrale se trouve résumée quasi intégralement dans la colonne des incipits, qui scande rythmiquement le travail d'écriture de Herrick, avec son *I sing* rappelant le *arma virumque cano*. Le prélèvement permet de saisir la structure dans son abstraction, dépouillée de la liste des thèmes qui en remplissent les cases, comme la chair autour des os d'un squelette.



On aurait tort de sourire et de trouver futiles ces réductions extrêmes, telle celle opérée par Man Ray dans son *Lautgedicht* de 1924. Tout poème frappe d'abord et aussi par ses aspects visuel et sonore.

E.E. Cummings appelait moqueusement *chimneys* les poèmes traditionnellement disposés en colonne. Plus subtilement Robert Graves (1955) affirmait que le rythme iambique est celui d'un peuple de rameurs.

À partir d'une phrase

✿ Edwin Morgan est l'auteur de deux textes importants pour illustrer les possibilités du prélèvement : l'un à partir de la phrase célèbre de *Rimbaud* « Il faut être résolument moderne » (prise en français mais traitée en anglais), l'autre à partir de la phrase non moins célèbre de l'évangile de Saint-Jean: « *I am the resurrection and the life.* »

À nouveau on préserve la disposition spatiale des lettres et on les sélectionne dans l'ordre où elles se présentent, laissant entre elles des blancs s'il échet. De nombreux mots ou syntagmes sont ainsi réalisables, que l'on enchaîne pour former un long texte parfaitement cohérent (quoique, par force, un peu gauche). Pour le Rimbaud on extrait de la sorte 37 fragments formant le texte anglais suivant :

old-solemn-ode-sold-for-fender-iron-bold-trend-in-letter-to-solo-reader-
arson-in-bolt-from-blue-absent-food-bud-found-utter-ferment-in-reason-
team-feed-at modern-lode-no-fetter-for-absolute-modern-men

que Morgan considérait sans doute comme un commentaire inattendu et oblique à Rimbaud ou même comme le déploiement exact de la pensée rimbaldienne. L'évangile livre quant à lui 54 mots et brefs syntagmes, arrangés en une sorte de prière litannique, amplification plus ou moins mystique de la pensée supposée du Christ.

Dans les deux cas on voit que la même lettre peut être utilisée plusieurs fois, pourvu que son emplacement soit conservé, selon un tableau rigoureux. Morgan appelle ce genre de texte « emergent poem » et affirme avoir extrait ces deux-ci d'une série... dont je n'ai pu trouver trace.

✿ Augusto De Campos répète la phrase *colocaramascara* (mettre un masque) en la disposant en colonne, avec à chaque ligne un décalage de 4 lettres. Des caractères gras font ressortir le mot *caracol* (escargot) formé par la fin de la phrase collée à son début. Mais d'autres mots apparaissent aussi, tels *cara* (visage), *loca* (folle), *rama*, ou *mas...*



À partir d'un mot

✿ La recherche de mots enfouis dans un autre mot anime d'assez nombreux poètes¹. Dès 1956, Wladimir Dias-Pino groupait dans son recueil *solida* diverses façons d'extraire de ce titre 7 mots (so, sol, lida, saido, solidao, da, dia). Non seulement il en extrait des mots et même des syntagmes doués de sens (*da lida do dia*) mais il souligne les figures géométriques engendrées par ces sélections, un paramètre auquel semblent indifférents les autres auteurs.

✿ En 1968 Decio Pignatari publiait *Mallarmé*, poème dans lequel il isolait, en préservant les adjacences de lettres (sauf pour le dernier : *mer*) six blocs doués de sens, soit en français soit en anglais. Les mots isolés apparaissent dans de petites fenêtres circulaires. Le renvoi à l'œuvre la plus célèbre de Mallarmé est opéré par le dessin d'un petit dé en position de signature. On ignore comment

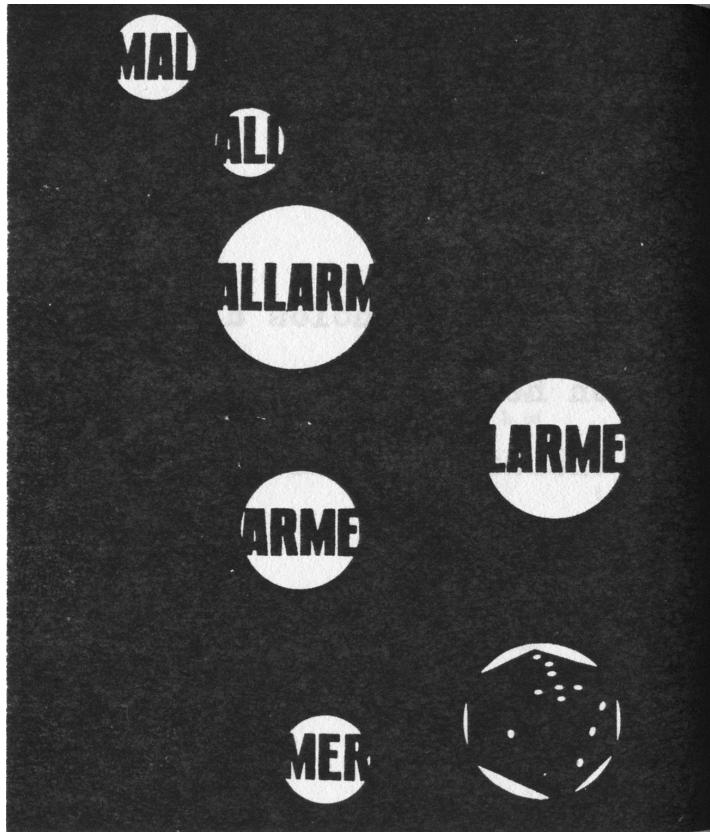
1. Cela permet de densifier discrètement l'expression, et cela aussi bien en poésie dite « linéaire ». T.A. Clark, par exemple, apprécie le fait que dans un poème sur les sentiers le mot *ramification* contienne *ram*, ou que dans un autre consacré au brouillard le mot *demystify* contienne *mist*.

l'auteur envisageait le rapport de ces blocs avec le texte-source, et si l'approximation *allarm/alarm* est consciente ou non. Peut-être, puisque les mots sélectionnés, mis ensemble, évoquent une déclaration pacifiste, s'agit-il de préciser le *désastre* qu'annonce le *Coup de dés* tout en signalant qu'il est contenu prémonitoirement dans le nom de son auteur ? Une fois de plus se manifeste le néocratylisme.

S O L I D A
 S O L I D A O
 S O
 L I D A
 S O L
 S A
 I D
 O
 D A
 L I D A
 D
 O
 D
 I A

Rappelons aussi la dévastatrice contrepublicité du même Pignatari (1957) qui découvre dans le slogan *Beba Coca-Cola* (Buvez Coca-Cola) les mots *cola* (colle ou queue), *coca*(ine), *babe* (baver), *caco* (tesson) et *cloaca* (cloaque)...

✿ À mesure que la source se réduit en taille, les possibilités de prélèvement s'amenuisent. Le sommet de la performance en matière de prélèvement est cependant *sweethearts* d'Emmett Williams, qui a composé un livre entier à partir de ce seul mot. La base de l'ouvrage est un bloc carré où ce mot de 11 lettres est répété 11 fois. À partir de là chacune des 140 pages présente une sélection



formant soit des mots (*he* ou *she*) soit de petites phrases (*he eats her wee sweet ears*), qui s'enchaînent en composant un aimable « cycle érotique ».

t e a r s
s w e e t
t e a r s

Les deux personnages se livrent à diverses actions : s'asseoir au bord de la mer, pleurer, manger des bonbons, etc. Le livre doit se lire à partir de la fin, seules les pages de gauche sont imprimées, et les 46 dernières doivent être feuilletées rapidement, comme un *flicker book*, pour obtenir un effet cinétique, toujours en rapport avec le thème.

✿ Relative rareté dans l'œuvre de Paul De Vree, le poème *teater* utilise la technique du prélèvement. Comparativement à d'autres poètes l'ayant pratiquée, De Vree a choisi un matériau de départ particulièrement bref : un seul mot, de six lettres. De ce mot il extrait néanmoins dix autres mots, tout en respectant l'ordre des lettres dans la source. Ces mots ne forment pas une phrase, et n'ont que peu de rapport entre eux. L'ensemble est multilingue et fait appel au néerlandais, à l'anglais, au français et à l'allemand.

```

t e a t e r
t   a t e
   e   t e r
t e a
t   a t e r
   e a t
t e t
t e a   r
   e t
t   a t
   e a t e r
t e a t e r

```

S'il faut à tout prix chercher un signifié global à ce poème, on peut le trouver dans une conception du théâtre comme reflet de toutes les activités humaines et même du monde entier.

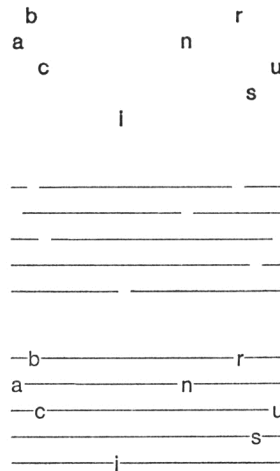
✿ Enfin Richard Kostelanetz a proposé une méthode d'extraction de mots dans une suite de huit textes, tous disposés de la même manière, et dont j'extraits *MADemoiselle*. L'idée consiste à faire glisser sur le mot-source (choisi long : LUMINESCENT, RAGAMUFFIN, DELIBERATE, ESPIONNAGE...) une sorte de « boîte » de 4 lettres, en sélectionnant les mots de 4 lettres qui s'y révèlent comme cachés ou enfouis. Dans le cas illustré on peut obtenir MADE, DEMO, [MOIS], OISE, ELLE. Cette méthode est la seule, avec le *Mallarmé* de Pignatari, à préserver les adjacences. On voit que les contraintes du « jeu » sont ici assez différentes de celles adoptées par les autres poètes cités.

```

MADE
DEMO
OISE
ELLE

```


✿ Notre dernier exemple est plus radical encore car au lieu d'extraire des mots il travaille sur des graphèmes. En allusion à *Oiseau en vol*, la sculpture bien connue de Brăncuși, Ernst Jandl (1970) extrait de l'alphabet (dont il conserve l'ordre) le nom de l'artiste (qui ne présente aucune lettre répétée) et le fait « flotter » dans l'espace, tel un oiseau en vol, de trois manières différentes.



Conclusion : le prélèvement et son ton complexe

Sur le plan formel d'abord, on retiendra que la technique du prélèvement produit des énoncés dédoublés, donc syncrétiques. En effet, dans tous les cas, même le texte non retenu reste présent, fût-ce par un blanc, une place vide, ou un trou¹... Parfois il y a contraction de la source, parfois amplification, mais le dédoublement est explicite, contrairement par exemple au cas de l'allusion, dont la détection dépend de la sagacité du lecteur. Chacun des énoncés possède sa propre isotopie et il y a lieu d'examiner comment se manifeste leur co-présence et à quoi elle aboutit. Elles doivent avoir des points communs (afin de justifier leur mise en relation) mais aussi des différences pour éviter la simple redondance. Elles sont donc *en tension*. Mais on ne peut en percevoir qu'une à la fois car elles sont aussi *en alternation*². La prise de conscience de cette pluralité par le lecteur ne peut intervenir qu'à un niveau métasémiotique, c'est-à-dire par un acte réflexif

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1. ... voire un tombeau dans le cas de Phillips : *A Humument* est devenu un grand cimetière et chaque page est une tombe où le cadavre de Mallock est patiemment dépecé.
 2. C'est, mais sur le plan sémantique cette fois, le même phénomène que l'alternation des formes repérée par les Gestaltistes (cf. le canard/lapin, ou le vase/visage de Rubin). Dans les deux cas le cerveau se montre capable de calculer deux ou plusieurs lectures satisfaisantes pour un même énoncé.

postérieur à la lecture. Elle se montre fortement liée à son appréciation esthétique.

En dépit de la parenté des méthodes employées, ces œuvres diffèrent profondément. Elles diffèrent d'abord par la motivation du choix du texte-source. Rühm, habité par une intention polémique ou pour le moins sarcastique choisit le journal quotidien parce qu'il en méprise le contenu. Aussi le détruit-il intégralement, le repoussant dans les ténèbres de l'indifférencié. C'est tout le contraire chez Clark, qui cherche à expliciter la sympathie obscure qu'il éprouve pour le texte-source, et à en extraire les noyaux qui engendrent cette sympathie. On pourrait penser qu'à peu près n'importe quel ouvrage ferait l'affaire comme texte-source, pourvu qu'il soit un réservoir de mots suffisamment abondant et varié. C'est pourquoi Phillips a choisi délibérément son texte au hasard... mais il a réalisé bientôt qu'il n'avait qu'aversion pour son contenu, ce qui n'a pas manqué d'infléchir ses interventions dans le sens d'une critique, d'une ridiculisation, ou même d'une contestation pure et simple. Qu'aurait-il fait si *A Human Document* s'était révélé un chef-d'œuvre méconnu ? Morgan et Williams ont par contre sélectionné avec soin des textes-sources déjà positivement connotés et se sont attachés à les démultiplier pour en mettre en valeur la fécondité. Celui qui parle d'*excavation* conçoit la source comme une mine, celui qui préfère parler d'*émergence* a une vision quasi mystique d'assomption de son contenu. Mais dans le cas général il s'agit plus souvent d'extraire que d'effacer.

La plupart de ces auteurs affirment, implicitement, que sous chaque texte existe un nombre infini de textes latents. Un brin de cabale linguistique sous-tend leur méthode car, aux modalités de mise en œuvre près, la plupart de ces usages du prélèvement sont apparentés à l'anagramme¹ et, comme lui, suggèrent une sorte de divination apte à révéler des caractéristiques cachées de la source : il s'agit de rien moins que d'une forme de néocratylisme. Caractéristiques cachées ou latentes de la source : la question de leur intentionnalité surgit à nouveau. On peut les considérer comme

- délibérément cachées par l'auteur ;
- présentes à l'insu de leur auteur ;
- résultant d'un simple hasard.

Dans ce dernier cas les auteurs se bornent à mettre en valeur leur heureuse trouvaille, sans en imputer la paternité à quiconque, mais dans les deux premiers cas c'est l'auteur de la source qui en reste responsable.

Une valeur commune à tous à tous ces textes, grands ou petits, est la réaction contre le romantisme et l'exhibition du moi. L'« interdit lyrique » d'Adorno est pris à la lettre. Comme le rappelait plus haut Tom Clark il s'agit pour l'auteur de

1. Déjà pratiquée à l'âge classique, mais toujours en faveur, notamment chez les surréalistes. Sur l'anagramme, lire Hallyn 1966.

distancer ses textes et d'en effacer le sujet. On peut pour cela avoir recours à la résection de textes connus (le *cut-up*) tout aussi bien qu'aux sources les plus anonymes, telles le poème trouvé ou le pillage d'almanachs et de catalogues divers. L'action de choisir demeure néanmoins signée... au point parfois de dénoter une arrogance prétentieuse et facile : « je dénonce, je corrige, je rature, j'améliore ». Quant à l'action d'effacer ou oblitération, elle n'a pas pour objectif principal de supprimer des mots ou des passages déterminés, même si la rature et la biffure portent en elles un fort coefficient de violence.

S'appuyer sur un texte existant ou, mieux encore, sur une entité linguistique anonyme, constitue certainement une forme de recyclage, mais ce recyclage est en fait inévitable : « *Immer, wenn wir den Mund aufmachen, reden 10.000 Tote mit* » (Hugo Von Hoffmansthal). Et Cocteau d'ajouter « Un chef-d'œuvre de la littérature n'est jamais qu'un dictionnaire en désordre. » Le simple usage de la langue, de ses mots et concepts inventés par d'autres, par la foule innombrable et anonyme de nos prédécesseurs, fait de nous tous de permanents et naïfs recycleurs. Nous participons ainsi, à une échelle plus vaste encore, à l'universel recyclage qui est la caractéristique vertigineuse de la nature entière... mais c'est là un niveau de sens bien théorique et peu senti. Ce recyclage obligé n'entraîne d'ailleurs pas automatiquement le ressassement, la répétition, donc la stérilité, car les fragments recyclés sont unis par une nouvelle syntaxe (une toposyntaxe du type de celle de la BD, occupant librement la surface et non plus strictement et linéairement linguistique) productrice de sens nouveaux.

La possible présence de contenus à l'insu même de l'auteur relance l'idée de cratylisme dans une autre direction encore. Tout locuteur utilise les mots du langage de sa société, mots qu'il n'a pas inventés mais qui, selon le cratylisme, gardent la trace d'une origine supposée « vraie », « authentique » (etc.) c.à.d. en fait *non arbitraire*. Le simple fait d'utiliser ces mots fait que leurs étymons sont présents dans les énoncés que ce locuteur profère, et le contraignent à un constant « double sens ». Toujours une voix lointaine parle à travers lui. En définitive, qu'elle soit pratiquée dans un but polémique, écologique, panégyrique ou divinatoire, la technique du prélèvement fait partie des procédures d'interprétation. Mais au lieu d'être passive et de se cantonner dans une herméneutique du signifié, elle explore activement son matériau de départ en manipulant son signifiant, soi-disant dépositaire de significations latentes.

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Under Erasure

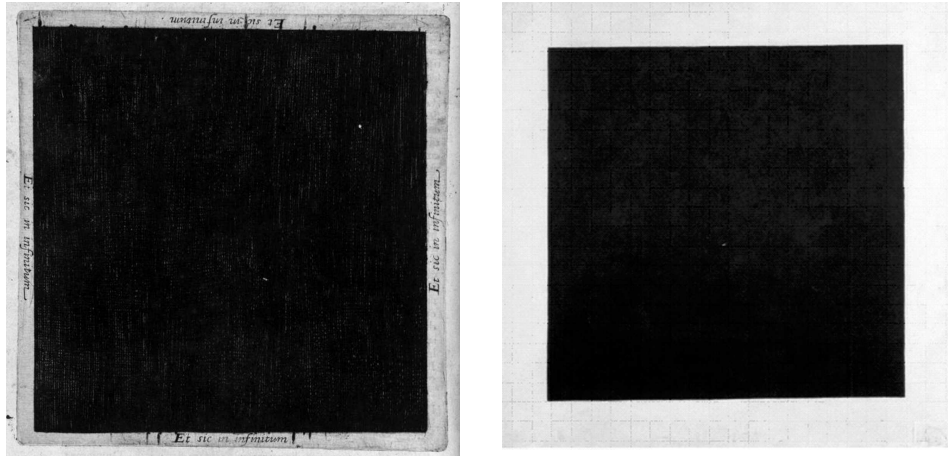
Blackholes, Holographs & the Missing Letter

Louis Armand
Charles University Prague

Tracing a nominal genealogy, from Robert Fludd's "Et sic in infinitum," to *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, to *Finnegans Wake*, to Georges Perec's *La Disparition* & beyond, it's possible to speak of a "poetics" of constitutive erasure that comes to generalize itself, not as a literary device, but as a textual condition—whose theoretical elaboration is paradigmatic of the so-called poststructuralist turn: exemplified in the section of Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* entitled "Writing Before the Letter" (1967) & the closely related essay "La différance" (1968). Like Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), Fludd's mimēsis of nothingness in *Utriusque Cosmi* (1617) & Lawrence Sterne's "black page" (from one of the foundation texts of the modern novel; 1768-9), pose questions about the representation of the negative & the limits of signification wherever writing *pushes into the domain of asemic interference*. In the case of Joyce's portmanteau (emergent lexicality or lexical fusions: "word, letter, paperspace") & Perec's lipogrammes (systematic lexical omissions), this question of representation is literalised in the operations of inscription itself—as the complementary counterpart of that work of "erasure" seemingly depicted by "blacking-out."

Such complementarity (we might call it "ambivalence") is foregrounded in Derrida's appropriation from Heidegger's *Zur Seinsfrage* of a device for placing certain "inadequate yet necessary" terms—such as ~~Being~~—*sous rature*, or "under erasure," so that both the term & its erasure appear simultaneously. For Derrida, however, this isn't a mere device to signal the "insufficiency" of privileged philosophical terms, but rather the sign of a general condition of writing/signification & the "total system"¹ of sense, since there is no *missing presence* of meaning

1. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 1974), 45.



Robert Fludd, "Et sic in infinitum" (1617) & Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1915)

before which language falters. Rather there is what Derrida terms "trace," or again "différance": an "erasure" that is necessarily inscribed at the *origin of sense* in order that signification (writing) occur *in the first place*. As such, *all writing is "under erasure."* Yet it is this conditionality of *sense* that is most often suppressed in the ideological claims placed upon its mimēsis (language as transparency). Within the discourse of the metaphysics of presence that Derrida's work critiques (from Plato's *Phaedrus* to Husserl's *Origins of Geometry* & beyond), writing isn't simply "under erasure" but *erased* (at best a "secondary mimēsis")—such that Heidegger's literal crossing-out brings to mind a classic negation-of-negation ("it presents itself," as Derrida says, "in the dissimulation of itself"¹). For Derrida, the ambivalence of the "signifier" (inscription, erasure, iteration) is radicalised as a quasi-Joycean *ambiviolence*, indicative of what Derrida elsewhere terms "writing power"²—evoking the violence of a generative poiēsis capable of "soliciting" structure: simultaneously *perturbative* &, in a seemingly paradoxical movement, *constitutive* of a "system" of sense. Above all, this *ambiviolence* solicits a counter-vailing *systemic violence*: of reduction, interpretation, & of what (in an apparent absence of ideology) is called "readability." In this way, & despite their superficial differences, the texts of Sterne, Joyce, Perce, *et al.*, interpolate a poetics of erasure as the very condition of writing *as such*—"origin of the experience of space & time," as Derrida says, "this writing of difference, this fabric of traces..."³

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1. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 45.
 2. Jacques Derrida, "Scribble: Writing Power," *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Evanston: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
 3. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 66.

Derrida's conception of a generalized *writing* casts back, among others, to Mallarmé, whose work is the focus of an extended meditation in his 1972 volume *La Dissémination*, where Mallarmé's short text "Mimique" is read in juxtaposition to a fragment of Plato's *Philebus*, & from which Derrida constructs (in a single remarkable footnote) an intricate analysis of what he terms the "double inscription of mimēsis."¹ While himself constructing a series of diagrammatic or typographically "concrete" textual apparatuses (replete with deletions implied by blank space & discontinuous syntax), Derrida goes on to consider Mallarmé's best-known work, *Un coup de dés (jamais n'abolira le hasard)*, evoking the idea of a "writing *en abyme*" or "writing in abyss" which cannot simply be reduced to a *phenomenon* by virtue of its becoming a black or white space ("the one and/or the other"):

EVEN WHEN TOSSED UNDER
ETERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES
FROM THE DEPTHS OF A SHIPWRECK
WHETHER
 the Abyss
whitened
 spreads out
 furious
 under an incline
 hovers desperately
 on the wing
 its own
 in

advance fallen in its pains to straighten its flight
 and covering the upbursting swell
 leveling off the surging leaps
 very inwardly sums up
the shadow buried in the deeps by this alternative sail
 to the point of adapting
 to the span
 its gaping depth as the hull
 of a structure
 listing to one or the other side...²

The radical ambivalence of Mallarmé's "spatialised" text (listing to one or *the other side*) calls back to the typographical logic that informed *Le Livre* (1842-1898), a project occupying the last three decades of the poet's life (commensurate in certain respects with Walter Benjamin's uncompleted *Passagenwerk*). In *Le*

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1. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 186.
 2. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 265.

Livre, Mallarmé outlined a conception of the “ideal book” as a cosmic architectonics representing “all existing relationships between everything.” It was to be a type of *Signatura Rerum*, an “open totality” which would depend for its *sense* not upon the revelation of a (divine) logos, but upon a signifying materiality—the “meaning of format”—a poetics of structure in which “artificial unity” would give way to “hesitation, disposition of parts, their alterations and relationships.”¹ In this is represented the ‘true cult of the modern era.’

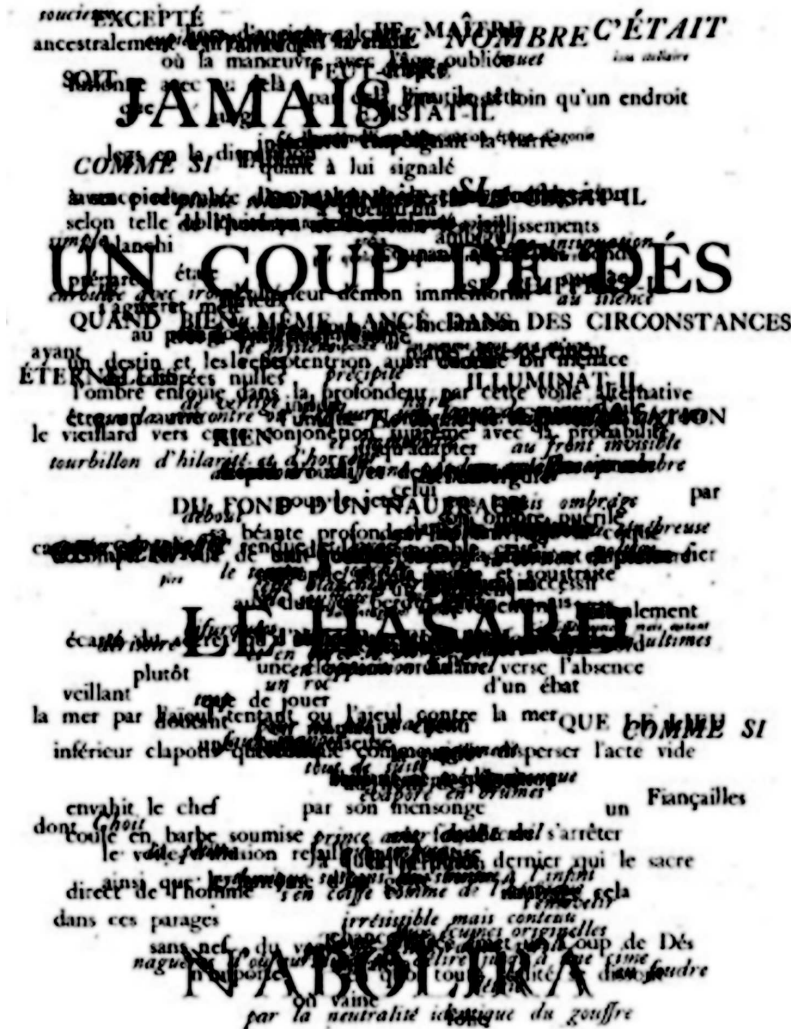
Un coup de dés, completed just before Mallarmé’s death & published in the journal *Cosmopolis* in 1897, can be regarded as a direct articulation of these ideas. Writing in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan argued that the poem “illustrates... the exploitation of all things as gestures of the mind, magically adjusted to the secret powers of being. As a vacuum tube is used to shape and control vast reservoirs of electric power, the artist can manipulate the low current of casual words, rhythms, and resonances to evoke the primal harmonies of existence”—an effect mirrored in Mallarmé’s *simultaneous vision of the page*.² *Un coup de dés* is thus less a “poem” in any conventional sense, than a poiësis—a cosmo-textuological spacetime machine. In the words of Cuban poet Octavio Armand:

The poem seems to evoke the theology and science of distant centuries and to anticipate twentieth-century physics. On the one hand it is impossible not to feel the ancient music of the spheres in the conjunction of musical score and star chart embodied in the poem. On the other hand, the idea of spacing reading so as to accelerate or diminish movement... links the notions of space and time so closely that it fuses them, creating a spacetime for poetry through the *simultaneous vision of the page*. Finally, *Un coup de dés* places thought in an orbit very close to Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty. Thought fits, or rather falls, in the cage of chance; it is impossible to escape chance, despite an heroic effort to place a limit on infinity. The fundamental phrase, which is the title, “A throw of dice will never abolish chance,” continues until the very last line, “All thought is a roll of dice.”

Typography underscores the idea that in essence we are reading a single, irrevocable, interminable, abysmal phrase. Scattered throughout the poem—on its only page—and mounted in the largest type used, the title is foregrounded continuously. The last verse, in the smallest type, occupies the background. This is doubly true in both instances: because of the order of reading and because of the spatial expansion or contraction implicit in working with different types. The throw of dice ends in another throw of dice that is the same one and the same as always. Dice, words, ideas, types run across the page until they are lost in the mind. Poem of blank spaces, music of silences. We see, read, hear the

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1. Cited in *Le “Livre” de Mallarmé*, ed. Jacques Scherer (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 32.
 2. Marshall McLuhan, “Joyce, Mallarmé and the Press,” *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan 1943-1962*, ed. Eugene McNamara (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 11.

forms of absence. Verbal phrase and musical phrase tend towards extreme purity: they expand in silence and they express it... The idea empties in an abyss of infinite possibilities, as does the poem. Poem? Drawing? Score? The poem seems to embody the uncertainty of the throw of dice. It is a genre of genres. *Un coup de dés* that combines and generates genres.¹



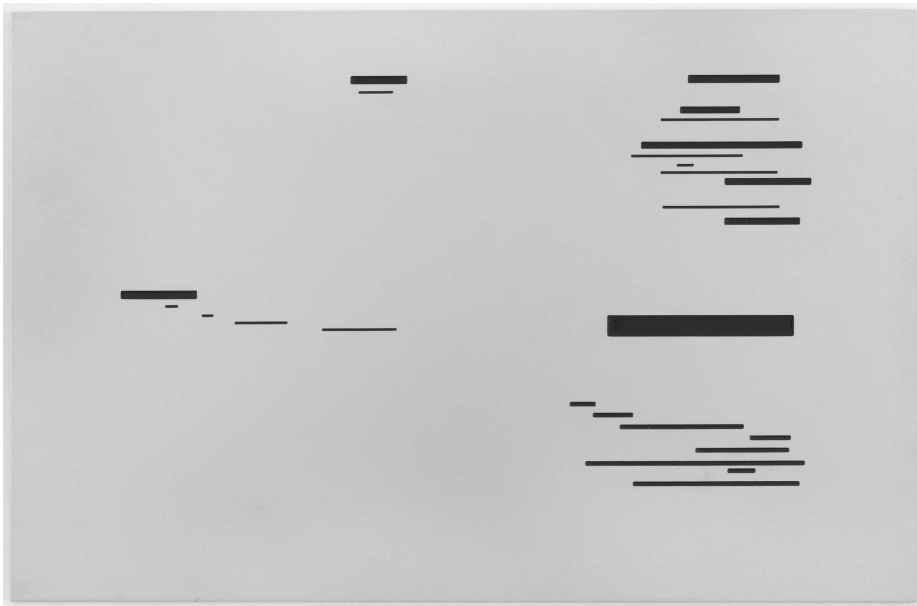
Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés* (composite view)

The spatio-temporalisations of Mallarmé’s text present themselves in a particularly “literalised” dimension, as an extruded palimpsest or *constellation* whose inscription in perspectival space erases itself under the sign of a temporal singu-

1. Octavio Armand, *Refractions*, trans. Carol Maier (New York: Lumen, 1994), 187.

larity. Flattened-out, in other words, the 12 sheets of Mallarmé's poem become a single "black page," an abyss of illegibility.

It is this prospect that looms in the background of Marcel Broodthaers's 1969 *Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* (staged at the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp)—where, among a display of "industrial poems" on vacuum formed plastic (like "oversized credit cards"), the artist first exhibited his erasure work *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. Loosely referencing Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 *Erased de Kooning Drawing* & the rectified readymades of Marcel Duchamp, Broodthaers—in Johanna Drucker's account—"reduces *Un coup de dés* to its structure—or to put it another way he elevates the structure of the work to a concept worthy of study in its own right, thus acknowledging Mallarmé's own fetishistic attention to this aspect of his work."¹



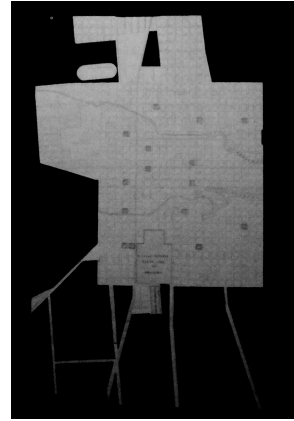
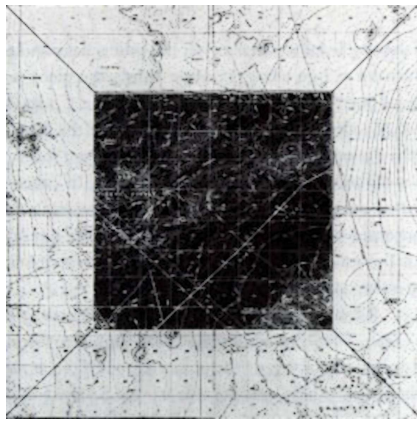
Marcel Broodthaers, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1969)

In Broodthaers' rendering, the 12 printed sheets of Mallarmé's poem are mapped onto a series of 12 anodised aluminium plates, engraved with rectangular black strips standing in for the "redacted" text. The result is a kind of "machine code," like a series of punch cards, or minimalist sculptural objects reminiscent of Donald Judd's anodised aluminium boxes (1968) & Elsworth Kelly's "Cité" studies ("Brushstrokes Cut into Twenty Squares and Arranged by Chance," 1951). Interestingly, Broodthaers' "text" also bears striking resemblance to another earlier work of not(at)ional erasure: Earle Brown's Cage-inspired piano piece *Four Systems* (1954) for David Tudor—in which the staff is transformed into a kind of

1. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artist's Books* (New York: Granary, 1995), 115.

distributed, vertical Malevich construction, where the “lines from left to right define the outer limits of the keyboard. The thickness may indicate dynamics or clusters.” Almost inevitably *Un Coup de Dés* invites, as Jacques Rancière says, “a reflection on the relation between words and space”—or between what is called *writing* (including music) & what is called an *image*. “Yet this image,” Rancière suggests, in consisting of “an erasure of the entire text and its replacement by black rectangles indicating its spatial distribution,” renders Mallarmé’s text only conventionally “illegible.”¹

For Rancière, Broodthaers’ erasurism equates to a reduction of language to plasticity, a “spatializing mimēsis.”² But at the same time, & precisely by virtue of this seeming reduction, its “plasticity” calls forth signification: it remains, first & foremost, an “act of erasure.” Where Derrida’s “sous rature” preserves the graphical (“readable”) form of the text, here we’re given its typographic distribution (erasure as diagram)—recalling Robert Smithson’s “Map for Double Nonsite, California & Nevada” (1968) & Bern Porter’s topographic erasure poems, or “map blank-outs,” such as “The Inhabitant” (1945), produced while Porter was a physicist on the Manhattan Project & indelibly bound up with the work of compartmentalized state secrecy.³ We can see Broodthaers’ reversioning of Mallarmé in this way, too, not as simple “redactology,” but as open encryption—a kind of signifiatory “hiding in plain sight.”



Robert Smithson, “Map for Double Nonsite, California & Nevada” (1968) & Bern Porter, “The Inhabitant” (1945)

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1. Jacques Rancière: “The Space of Words: From Mallarmé to Broodthaers,” *Porous Boundaries: Texts and Images in Twentieth-century French Culture*, ed. Jérôme Game (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 41.
 2. Rancière: “The Space of Words,” 43.
 3. See James Schevill, *where to go what to do when you are Bern porter: A Personal Biography* (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 1992), 98.

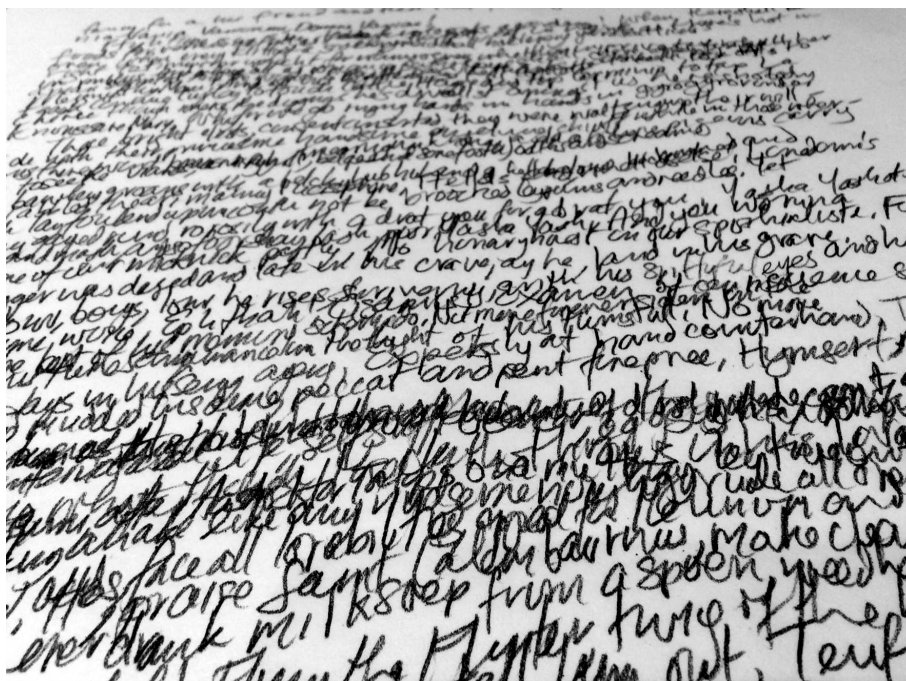
Broodthaers' blacking-out of *Un coup de dés* (itself an invocation of chance procedures against the "poetic" projection of originary meaning, originality, authorship & authenticity) creates a field of open-substitution, of semantic dark-matter defined both by a stark materiality & radical ambivalence. The univocal command of meaning is placed, as it were, in suspense or "under erasure"—a stance (as Jerome Rothenberg says of the writings of Jackson Mac Low) "devoid of fanaticism" (it's discursively *blanked-out*), yet whose concreteness is nevertheless "political"¹—insofar as the *ambivalence* of this abyssal text suspends any hierarchy of reference.

Mallarmé's *lingua blanca*, as an exploration of typographics & syntactical recombination, likewise anticipates the atomization—or etymisation—of language in Velimir Khlebnikov's *zaum* poetics & Joyce's *Wake*. The materiality of spacing & interval in *Un coup de dés* radicalises the effect of writing as a form of field-phenomenon or constellation-effect: a simultaneous vision in which linear hierarchies of meaning devolve into a generalised transversality. As Mallarmé writes, "NOTHING WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE BUT THE PLACE EXCEPT PERHAPS A CONSTELLATION."² This prototypical "field composition" is both relativistic (an interplay of inertial frames of reference) & complementary (a play of superposition & decoherence). In presenting itself to perception it simultaneously erases itself: from the particularization of "word, letter, paperspace" (in Joyce) to the semantic event-horizon of the "black page" (etc.).

Proceeding in this vein of reconstitutive erasurism, in 2017 Derek Beaulieu—following a project of decomposing Andy Warhol's *A* down to its punctuation (*à la* John Cage's *Empty Words*)—commenced a series of visual transcriptions of every page of *Finnegans Wake*, in the form of a blind contour drawing (graphite on paper) described as "records of readings" (in a comparable sense to the implied "readings" of Cage's 1976 *Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake*—in which Joyce's text was "reproduced," in a manner of speaking, as a series of mesostics). Beaulieu's re-writing of *Finnegans Wake* situates itself in a constellation of relations to the fabric & contours of Joyce's text, & within a field of iteration in Western literature & art from Borges' conceptual rewriting of *Don*

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- 1 Jerome Rothenberg, Preface to Jackson Mac Low, *Representative Works: 1938-1985* (New York: Roof Books, 1986), viii.
 2. A constellation may be thought of as a *virtual* in which disparate events are said to have been "brought into communication" in time & space—a montage effect by which communication is underwritten & made possible by the absence of any measure of a common, objective present, or "degree zero." In this sense there are no degrees or planes of a revelation of structural intention, only degrees or planes of *constellation*. There exists no network or *system* of signification to render the constellation meaningful in & of itself, merely the confabulated appearance of unicity, of a fixed circuit of spatial & temporal variances (a *primum mobile*)—a schematised, *contingent* present from which "all other" orientations of time & space take their measure according to the relativity of a generalised parallax or anamorphosis.

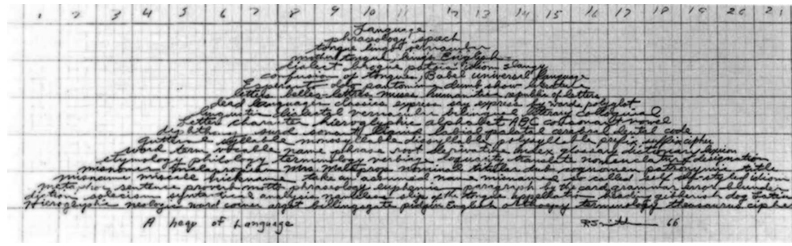
Quixote to the “appropriation art” of Sherrie Levine. Its status as *drawing* places it in a particular relation also to a certain *withdrawal*: as Derrida says, “a *re-drawing*, a *with-drawing*, or *retreat* [*re-trait*], at once the interposition of a mirror, an impossible reappropriation or mourning, the intervention of a paradoxical Narcissus, sometimes lost *en abyme*...”¹



Derek Beaulieu, “The 185th piece in my blind-contour rendering of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*” (2018)

This *erasure* in the act of repetition also implies a certain *blindness* (a blind contour) from which representation speaks (that which is given in place of that which withdraws, in the deferral of signification, etc.). In their most banal formulation, Beaulieu’s “records of readings” are a kind of cenotaph, a memorial erected out of a *heap of language*—reminiscent of Smithson’s 1966 work of that name & such visual-verbal “deformations” as Ulli Freer’s “TORO” & Pierre Joris’ “Five Translations from Arthur Rimbaud’s *Une saison en Enfer*.” This “simultaneous vision of the page” lists to the side of *both* texture & textuality, in which (in a seemingly paradoxical movement) an act of semantic erasure or withdrawal stands at the centre of its signifying possibility.

1. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.



Robert Smithson, “A Heap of Language” (1966)

This paradox (or “paradox lust”) is of course recognizable as one of the key tenets of Joyce’s text itself—structured as it is around the allegory of ALP’s “missing letter” (being the holograph of *Finnegans Wake* no less). This letter, having been lost under mysterious circumstances, is re-discovered (by a hen) in a garbage heap & subsequently subjected to a forensic process of exegetical defacement by a certain “grave Brofèsor” (*FW* 124.09). The “record of reading” thus produced resembles a textual fabric “pierced,” or *parsed* “by numerous stabs and foliated gashes made by a pronged instrument” (being the fork of “Brotffessor Prendergust” [*FW* 124.15], with which he has eaten his breakfast):

These paper wounds, four in type, were gradually and correctly understood to mean stop, please stop, do please stop, and O do please stop respectively. [*FW* 124.01-05]

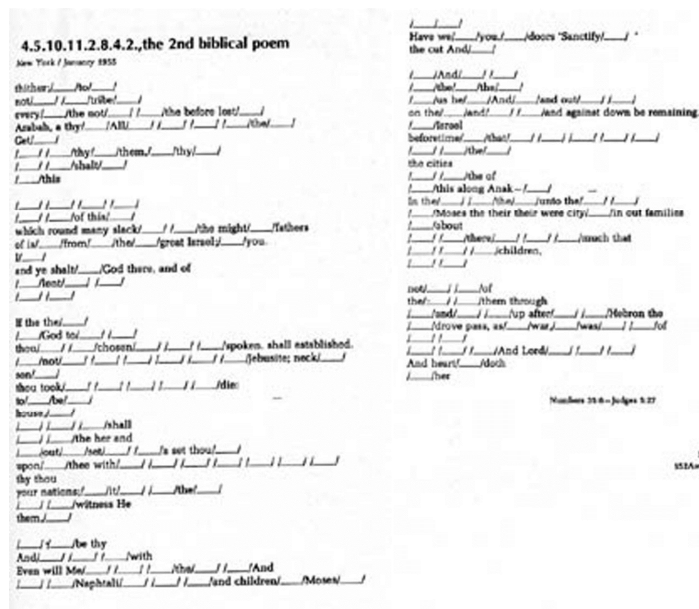
At which point Joyce’s text itself “breaks down” into a series of quasi-phonetic notations (on the edge of intelligibility), satirically analysing the significance of the defaced letter’s “punctuation”:

to=introducere a notion of time [ùpon à plane (?) sù”fàç’e’] by pùnc! ingh oles (sic) in iSpace?! [*FW* 124.12]

But this *defacement of reading* is already a general condition of the text: not, as in the allegory of ALP’s letter, as something inflicted by interpretation, but as that which solicits & makes possible “interpretation” from the outset. The simultaneous *drawing & withdrawing* of the text—its “punctuation,” so to speak—is everywhere evident in the *Wake*’s portmanteau, where terms like “riverrun” invite re-inscription as, for example, “river ran” in order to be conventionally “read”—in other words, to be *grammaticised, translated, etc.*

Like Perec’s lipogrammes, the *Wake* preprogrammes & precognizes, so to speak, the *deformations* of “reading” by encoding within itself the processes of its own inscription, deletion, reinscription & computation. Such processes echo in Cage’s recodings of the *Wake* & throughout the body of procedural/permutative poetics that eventually feeds into the OuLiPo, including such “erasure” poems as Jackson Mac Low’s “7.1.11.1.11.9.3!11.6.7!4.,a biblical poem” (1955). The sequence, “5 biblical poems,” was the first occasion on which Mac Low employed chance operations, applied to found texts (Genesis, Numbers Judges, etc.)—

though it wasn't published until 1968, in Bernadette Mayer & Vito Acconci's *0 to 9* magazine. The titles of the individual poems (e.g. "7.1.11.1.11.9.3!11.6.7!4.") referred to the poem's system of composition, described by Mac Low as follows: "each stanza has the same number of lines as the number of integers in the title, & each poem has as many stanzas as lines in each stanza. The integers show how many *events* (single words or silences) occur in each line of a stanza... Silences are represented by boxes."¹



Jackson Mac Low, "4.5.10.11.2.8.4.2., the 2nd biblical poem," from *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (1973)

bpNichol's *Translating Translating Apollinaire: a preliminary report from a book of research* (1979) extends Mac Low's chance & procedural operations of transmission, erasure, interference, etc., into a general poetics of *translation* ("memory translation," "sound translation," "acrostic translation," "re-arranging letters alphabetically," "musical translation," "homolinguistic translation," "stereo translation," "alchemical translation," "durability translation," "typewriter translation") requiring a generalised logic of formal equivalence.² Calling to mind Duchamp's "Apolinère Enameled" (1916)—in which the author of *Calligrammes* is not only "translated" into an advertisement for Sapolin Enamel paint, but depicted as a bed-frame drawn in a deliberately impossible perspective (an illusion produced by Duchamp's *erasure* of a piece of the frame)—Nichol's polyvalent "equivalence" systems hinge upon a simultaneous *ambi*-valence. As in Raymond

1. Jackson Mac Low, *Representative Works: 1938-1985* (New York: Roof, 1986), 18.
 2. See bpNichol, *Translating Translating Apollinaire: A Preliminary Report* (Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1979).

Queneau's *Exercices de Style*, the "original" translation of Apollinaire to which the sequence "refers" is endlessly distributed between innumerable & increasingly bifurcating modes of *presentation* (like the *Wake*'s "genetic permutations" around the letter's HCE & ALP, & Cage's mesostics on JAMES JOYCE), all the while constituting a "core" of *unpresentability*—a "system" of recursive *différance* in which the so-called limits of intelligibility are placed under the constant strain of *translation*.

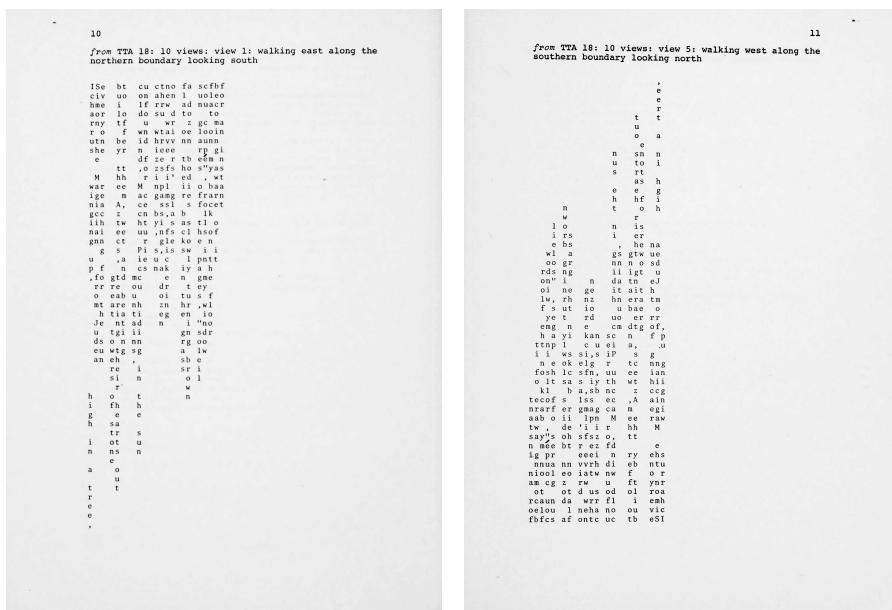


Marcel Duchamp, "Apolinère Enameled" (1916)

The genesis of Nichol's poem sequence began with an early translation-experiment entitled "Translating Apollinaire" (1963) which Nichol began re-working in 1975 by subjected it to "as many translation/transformation processes as i & other people [including Dick Higgins, Steve McCaffery, Douglas Barbour] could think of": translation placed, so to speak, *en abyme*. Nichol conceived of the work as "openended" & "probably unpublishable," utilising—among others—collaborative techniques like "alter-&pass-on" & "alter-&return" typical of the contemporary mailart networks (some sections of the *Report* were still circulating after Nichol's death in 1988, evoking thereby an ultimate gesture of *authorial erasure*).¹ Translating "translation" into a work of Derridian *dissemination*—across the (implied) entirety of the "verbi visi voco"² field of signifying possibility as a kind of cybernetic "communication system"—Nichol's project comes to describe something like a blueprint for a *potential writing*, an open-source poetic "operating system" in general development (see, for example, "TTA 30: poem as a machine for generating line drawings"). Yet *thereby* this blueprint, like the am-

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1. Among the work's collaborators were Steve McCaffery, Dick Higgins, Douglas Barbour.
 2. This expression, from *Finnegans Wake*, was adopted by Bob Cobbing & Bill Griffiths for their 1992 Writers Forum anthology, *verbi visi voco: a performance of poetry*.

biguous “source” its translation system refers to, retains the status of an “originary”—which is to say *interminable*—erasure. It gives itself, as Derrida says, in the dissimulation of itself, as a translation-always-already.



bpNichol’s, from “TTA 18: 10 views,” *Translating Translating Apollinaire: A Preliminary Report* (1979)

Such generative erasure & reconfiguration of conventional exegetical frameworks (so to speak) evokes a quantum-like undecidability/irreducibility in delimiting a general field of signifying possibility. The record of such “reading”—as the inscription of a “disappearance”—*presents itself* in the form of a double erasure that, like ALP’s missing letter, leaves traces (as the holograph of its own *disappearance*, the erasure of its erasure). The sign of “insufficiency” in this work of redaction isn’t a measure of the failure of “sense,” but of a *mimēsis of an erasure at the origin*—“l’acte vide,” as Mallarmé says—whose “singularity” is the mark of the unrepresentable¹.

1. This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund-Project “Creativity & Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

Effacement, poésie, critique

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De l'*Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) de Robert Rauschenberg au livre d'artiste *A Humument* de Tom Phillips (1966-2016) — en passant par les révisions mallarméennes de Marcel Broodthaers (*IMAGE*, 1969), le *found footage* de Martin Arnold (*Shadow Cuts*, 2010) et les expérimentations post-oubapiennes de Jochen Gerner (*TNT en Amérique*, 2002) —, la pratique de l'effacement apparaît tel un procédé central du monde artistique et littéraire depuis plus d'un demi-siècle. Nombreux sont en effet les artistes visuels (peintres, photographes, vidéastes) et les écrivains (le plus souvent poètes) à s'être appropriés des œuvres ou des textes existants dans le but d'en altérer le sens et/ou d'en moduler la lisibilité. Ces manœuvres appropriationnistes ne touchent d'ailleurs pas seulement les champs respectifs des arts plastiques et de la littérature. On les observe également dans les domaines, peut-être moins balisés à cet égard, mais tout aussi féconds, de la musique, de la bande dessinée et du cinéma expérimental.

Dans la foulée de la frénésie révisionniste prônée par divers avatars du post-modernisme et du déconstructionnisme, on assiste à un véritable âge d'or de ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler la « poétique de l'effacement ». La *success story* de ces pratiques, dans le monde anglo-saxon en particulier, est souvent associée à un désir de revisiter des œuvres ou des genres canoniques dans le but de mettre au jour leurs appareillages formels et idéologiques, qu'il s'agisse de détourner le lyrisme des *Sonnets* de Shakespeare (Jen Bervin), d'oblitérer la prose d'un roman victorien afin d'en « exhumer » le contenu « caché » (Phillips), ou de recouvrir d'encre noire les pages d'un album de Tintin (Gerner).

On s'en souvient, Paul Ricœur fit de Marx, Nietzsche et Freud les pères fondateurs d'une « école du soupçon¹ » prônant une critique radicale des illusions et mensonges qui affectent notre faculté de compréhension et d'interprétation des textes. L'art de l'effacement doit-il être considéré comme une manifestation

1. Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation, Essai sur Freud*, Éd. du Seuil, Paris 1965.

parmi d'autres de ce que Rita Felski a décrit comme le « stade terminal d'ironie » où se trouveraient aujourd'hui des sciences humaines (*humanities*) possédées par « la pulsion incontrôlable de mettre des guillemets partout¹ » ? Quelle soit la réponse à cette question, la pulsion révisionniste et appropriationniste qui caractérise l'art de l'effacement semble moins dominée par l'intention de détruire l'œuvre elle-même que de revisiter des textes qui nous sont (trop ?) familiers, souvent des classiques, dans le but de mettre en lumière et, parfois, de corriger leurs défauts et limites. Il ne s'agit pas seulement d'assainir le document source, à la manière des censeurs, afin de le purger de tout ce qui est indésirable, ni de gommer ce qui est jugé inopportun ou dangereux. Dans les œuvres envisagées plus loin, l'artiste de l'effacement travaillerait plutôt comme un sculpteur qui ôterait des copeaux de matière visuelle et/ou textuelle pour donner forme à de nouveaux motifs sémiotiques et porter l'œuvre à un autre niveau de lecture et d'interprétation — au point de dépasser, voire de surpasser parfois l'œuvre initiale. De fait, la poétique de l'effacement ajoute et crée au moins autant qu'elle n'efface et soustrait.

Comme nous le rappelle Felski, il convient de garder à l'esprit les enseignements de Ricœur, lequel nous invite à « conjuguer à la volonté du soupçon [au] vif désir d'écouter » ; « rien n'interdi[sant] à nos lectures de mêler analyse et attachement, critique et amour² ». À cet égard, il est intéressant de rapprocher l'art de l'effacement de la poétique de l'objet trouvé dont les ready-made de Duchamp ont assuré la notoriété. Cependant, là où Duchamp élevait des objets ordinaires au rang d'œuvres d'art en les isolant de leurs contextes et de leurs valeurs d'usage, les œuvres rangées sous la bannière de l'*erasurism* poursuivent des buts bien différents dans la mesure où leur référent central reste l'œuvre source, cette dernière étant soumise à diverses formes de manipulations physiques dont la fonction et la signification tiennent tout entières dans la tension entre le texte d'origine et son avatar « effacé ». Comme c'est le cas dans des formes plus traditionnelles de réécriture de textes canoniques (e.g., *La Prisonnière des Sargasses* de Jean Rhys ou *Mister Pip* de Lloyd Jones, mais on pourrait citer bien d'autres romans post-modernes de tendance néo-victorienne), le fantôme du texte fondateur est voué à hanter sans fin la version « traitée »³, le contenu oblitéré étant toujours susceptible de refaire surface, de manière plus ou moins claire et explicite.

Cela étant, les méthodes d'effacement dont il est question ici se distinguent des réécritures postmodernes précitées en ceci que le geste destructeur affecte non seulement le contenu du texte mais aussi (et surtout) la matière textuelle en

1. Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Wiley-Blackwell, New York 2008, p. 2.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

3. Le mot « traité » est utilisé ici à la fois dans un sens général et pour désigner une pratique proche de la pratique qui consiste à « traiter » ou « préparer » un piano ou une guitare en plaçant des objets sur ses cordes de manière à en altérer le son.

soi. C'est cette attention aux propriétés concrètes et matérielles du langage (ou des images) qui réunit les diverses formes de suppression, oblitération, camouflage, annulation, éraflage, frottage, tamponnage, etc., que nous regroupons sous l'éventail de la catégorie d'« effacement ».

Les blancs de Mallarmé/Broodthaers

Qu'il s'agisse de subterfuges textuels ou extratextuels, Stéphane Mallarmé reste une figure centrale pour les poètes et poéticiens du blanc, dès lors qu'il s'agit d'explorer la présence spectrale de ce qui a été au sein même de ce qui n'est plus. La poésie de Mallarmé nous fait entrevoir des objets paradoxaux qui s'annulent ou disparaissent dès qu'ils sont nommés (on se souvient de « l'absent tombeau », de ces « vols qui n'ont pas fui » et de « l'aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore » du « Sonnet allégorique de lui-même », titre auquel le poète renonça à raison). Opérant l'annihilation réciproque de la négativité et de la positivité (« Devant son existence [celle du hasard] la négation et l'affirmation viennent échouer¹ » écrit Mallarmé dans *Igitur*), l'espace du poème semble autoriser d'infinies combinaisons et permutations, multipliées et complexifiées par les « circonstances éternelles » du coup de dés qui est lui-même, selon l'auteur, le résultat de toute opération de pensée (« Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés² »).

La version d'*Un coup de dés* que signe Marcel Broodthaers en 1969 dote l'édition Gallimard du poème de Mallarmé d'un nouveau sous-titre : « IMAGE ». Broodthaers oblitére le texte de Mallarmé et y substitue sur chaque double page des rectangles typographiques noirs. (Visuellement similaire, le « Lautgedich » (1924) de Man Ray est un précurseur important, avec cette différence essentielle que le poème de Man Ray insiste plus sur le son que sur l'espace, comme en témoigne la musicalité silencieuse, résiduelle, de son schéma métrique régulier.) « IMAGE » répond à une exigence formulée par Mallarmé dans sa Préface : que la page soit ouverte comme une toile invitant à une « vision simultanée³ » où « le papier intervient chaque fois qu'une image, d'elle-même, cesse ou rentre⁴ ». Dans la foulée, « IMAGE » constitue une extension littérale de la fameuse sentence du poète selon laquelle « le vers ne doit donc pas, là, se composer de mots, mais d'intentions, et toutes les paroles s'effacer devant la sensation⁵ ». Que Mallarmé insiste tant sur (l'auto-)suppression des mots et sur le rôle de la « sensation » fait écho à son désir plus général de « peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle pro-

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1. Mallarmé, *Igitur*, dans *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 441.
 2. Mallarmé, préface au Coup de dés, in *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés*, dans *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 387.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 406.
 5. Stéphane Mallarmé, « Lettre à Henri Cazalis », 30 octobre 1864, dans *Œuvres complètes*, p. 663.

duit »¹. Issu du constat que l'artiste peut travailler « par *élimination*, et toute vérité acquise ne [naître] que de la perte d'une impression² », la poétique mallarméenne laisse entendre que les poètes eux-mêmes ne sont que « de vaines formes de la matière » face au « Rien qui est la vérité³ ». La première édition d'« IMAGE » souligne encore davantage cette hypothèse en imprimant les bandes de texte oblitéré sur du papier translucide, une technique permettant de prolonger en profondeur la plasticité bidimensionnelle des expériences verbo-visuelles de Mallarmé. Jacques Rancière est peut-être celui qui résume le mieux les implications artistiques et philosophiques de ce geste quand il écrit que Broodthaers « accomplit et contredit tout à la fois l'esthétique de Mallarmé »⁴, mobilisant différentes formes d'autosuppression aboutissant à une « spatialité indifférente » gouvernée par « le pouvoir du vide ».

Gommages

Les Gommages d'Alain Robbe-Grillet (1953) est une autre œuvre saillante de l'histoire de l'effacement, tant au niveau du contenu que de la forme. Selon Robbe-Grillet lui-même, le Nouveau Roman anti-policier entreprend d'effacer les conventions du genre en le libérant de « l'idéologie réaliste où tout a un sens⁵ », préférant « les structures lacunaires⁶ » aux schémas narratifs clos du roman à énigme et suivant les pistes d'un sens qui fuit à travers les « trous⁷ » du réel. Ce processus aboutit à la pulvérisation de l'intrigue traditionnelle, ce que traduit bien l'objet de la quête du détective Wallas : « une gomme douce, légère, friable, que l'écrasement ne déforme pas mais réduit en poussière⁸ », une gomme « parfaite » qui peut-être n'existe pas mais qui, dans le contexte du roman policier, relie symboliquement l'effacement et la mort. Le meurtre de l'intrigue est le crime parfait dont seul un lecteur vigilant peut espérer être témoin, crime qui, incidemment, est aussi parfait que la gomme idéale de Wallace puisqu'aucun crime réel n'a lieu dans le texte de Robbe-Grillet.

Eraserhead (1977) de David Lynch est une autre histoire qui s'efface à mesure qu'elle se raconte, gommant graduellement ses actualisations passées, présentes et futures. On se souviendra de la scène où le protagoniste Henry

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1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Crise de vers*, dans *Œuvres complètes*, p. 364.
 2. Stéphane Mallarmé, « Lettre à Eugène Lefébure », 27 mai 1867, dans *Correspondances complètes*, Gallimard, Paris 1995, p. 349.
 3. Stéphane Mallarmé, « Lettre à Henri Cazalis », 28 avril 1866, dans *Œuvres complètes*, p. 695.
 4. Jacques Rancière, *L'Espace des mots : de Mallarmé à Broodthaers*, Musée des beaux-arts de Nantes, 2007.
 5. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Entretien*, « Littérature », 49/1, 1983, p. 16.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Les Gommages*, Minuit, Paris 1953, p. 132.

Spencer imagine qu'on transporte sa tête à l'usine de crayons où des morceaux de son cerveau sont transformés en gomme. Quelle que soit la signification de la métaphore feuilletée de Lynch (Henry craint de toute évidence d'être physiquement effacé, mais le film évoque aussi la possibilité de voir l'univers entier emporté dans un nuage de gomme poudreuse), nous avons affaire ici à un exemple d'effacement qui se retourne contre lui-même, tel un serpent qui se mordrait la queue.

La gomme, en tant qu'objet concret et esthétique, réapparaît dans *Ommage, work in progress* de Jérémy Bennequin qui entreprend de gommer une à une les pages de l'édition Gallimard d'*À la recherche du temps perdu* de Marcel Proust. S'en suit une série de performances et de photographies qui donnent à voir non seulement les pages effacées du livre mais aussi les résidus de la performance (gommes usées, monticules de poussière gris-bleu issue des gommes), lesquels, une fois rassemblés sur le bureau de l'artiste, peuvent être assimilés à une installation miniature d'*arte povera*. Le jeu de mot sur « gommage » et « hommage » est symptomatique du statut ambivalent de la poétique de l'effacement qui fait son miel du désir de défaire et détruire tout en rendant un hommage ambigu à l'objet qui subit l'attaque.

L'effacement obsessionnel de Bennequin ne connaît pas de limites et l'on soupçonne qu'il ne finira jamais de gommer Proust, même si il est réputé travailler sur une nouvelle page de l'édition Gallimard environ une heure chaque jour. En nous encourageant à regarder (plutôt qu'à lire) les mots pâlis, *Ommage* souligne leur vulnérabilité physique sur la page. Quant aux pages froissées et chiffonnées des volumes traités, elles témoignent que toute œuvre d'art contient les germes structurels et matériels de sa propre destruction. Qui plus est, elles exhalent aussi une forme particulière de nostalgie, doucement ironique, qui n'est pas sans nous rappeler les pages cornées des livres aimés : il n'y a qu'un livre usé pour devenir un objet d'affection, laquelle sera d'autant plus intense que le livre est abîmé.

L'angoisse de l'influence

Le statut canonique de Mallarmé ou de Proust constitue la clé de voûte des expériences d'effacement de Broodthaers et Bennequin. À des degrés divers, « IMAGE » et *Ommage* laissent entendre que l'effacement artistique — qu'il soit affectueux, ironique ou les deux — trouve souvent sa source dans une tentative de gérer l'angoisse qu'exerce l'influence des maîtres sur leurs contemporains ainsi que sur les générations d'artistes qui les suivent. Dans *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom défend l'idée que, depuis Milton, les poètes ont toujours cherché à échapper à la présence obsédante de leurs prédécesseurs. Pour certains artistes de l'effacement, la solution semblerait consister à refaire ou à « défaire » le passé en corrigeant ou défigurant les textes anciens. Dans bon nombre de cas, le mot

« correction » dénote la punition autant que l'amélioration : à cet égard, il faut se souvenir ici de la notion de « clinamen » élaborée par Bloom, qui désigne une erreur de lecture créatrice, susceptible de réparer les manques et limites du texte source.

RADI OS (1977) de Ronald Johnson, un des tout premiers exemples d'effacement textuel dans le domaine de la poésie contemporaine, s'inscrit parfaitement dans le modèle proposé par Bloom. Dans cet ouvrage, Johnson oblitère en partie les quatre premiers livres du *Paradis perdu* (1667) de John Milton, en conservant seulement quelques mots à chaque page du poème originel. Réduisant le souffle épique du poème de Milton à quelques vers libres épars dont le champ lexical évoque la présence des forces naturelles et des éléments, *RADI OS* perturbe les frontières et hiérarchies génériques tout en minant les fondations même de l'épistémè du texte source. (Quelques années plus tard, Johnson publiait *PALMS*, expérience similaire fondée sur les *Psaumes*. L'auteur prétend en avoir exclu le serpent en « retirant les "S"¹ ».)



Dans sa Préface, Johnson explique avoir « composé » les blancs de l'œuvre, comparant les mots biffés aux notes inaudibles du *Concerto Grosso* de Haendel, « les moments inaudibles laissant des trous dans la musique » du compositeur². En outre, au-delà des ondes sonores, le mot « *RADI OS* » évoque aussi (en particulier pour une oreille française ou sensible aux étymologies) les radiographies

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1. Ronald Johnson interviewé by Peter o'Leary in 1995, document web, www.trifectapress.com/johnson/interview.html.
 2. Ronald Johnson, *RADI OS*, Flood Editions, Chicago 2005, non pag.

médicales : la césure entre *RADI* et *OS* dénude implicitement *Le Paradis Perdu* jusqu'à l'os comme pour laisser entrevoir sa charpente interne¹.

Jean Clair a défendu l'idée que la découverte des rayons-x par Wilhelm Röntgen, en 1895, a influencé toute l'histoire de l'art, divisant les peintres en deux catégories selon leur façon de représenter le corps, et le crâne en particulier : les « traditionnalistes », tels Ensor ou Cézanne, qui continuent à utiliser la boîte crânienne comme un symbole des vanités mondaines, et les « modernes », à l'instar de Munch ou Duchamp, que l'exploration de la mécanique interne du corps passionne, sans qu'ils éprouvent pour autant le besoin de s'encombrer de métaphores². En révélant l'ossature lyrique de l'épopée tout en isolant ses « organes » sémantiques vitaux, la version radiographiée du *Paradis Perdu* de Johnson s'inscrit littéralement dans une telle démarche concrétiste et matériologique³. Marjorie Perloff évoque aussi la radiographie dans son analyse des usages de « l'arthrographie » (examen aux rayons x de la structure d'une articulation) auxquels s'adonne Johnson dans un livre ultérieur, intitulé *ARK*. Elle défend l'idée que la manipulation letriste du texte matériel permet à Johnson d'examiner et de diagnostiquer « ce qui se trame sous la surface » et les conditions plurielles dans lesquelles le sens naît d'une combinaison de mots voisins⁴.

Shakespeare sous rature

Les poèmes de *RADI OS* découlent de la suppression complète des mots « non-désirés », ne laissant aucune trace du texte originel hors la configuration de la page (les mots survivants ont gardé la place qu'ils avaient dans le poème de Milton). D'autres poètes de l'effacement ont choisi un format qui laisse au lecteur un accès total ou partiel à l'œuvre originelle. Dans *Nets*, réécriture des *Sonnets*, Jen Bervin réduit les poèmes de Shakespeare à un pâle arrière-fond sur lequel se détachent en gras les mots sélectionnés. À la différence de Johnson, la « réduction » de Bervin n'adopte pas une démarche « lyrico-élémentaliste ». Elle tendrait plutôt à dépouiller les sonnets du Barde au point qu'ils ressemblent à des fragments de rêveries abstraites et autoréflexives, portant la marque de la poésie post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. (« Dans l'unicité les voix / sonnent / chacune dans chaque / chanson sans paroles, à plusieurs, semblant une seule⁵ »).

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1. Il serait possible ici d'étendre la discussion à Cage, aux cassettes analogiques effacées ou, plus généralement, aux pratiques de mixage et de traitement de son analogiques et digitales.
 2. Jean Clair and Manlio Brusatin (éds.), *Identity and Alterity: Figures of the Body 1895–1995*, Marsilio, Venise 1995, p. xxvii.
 3. Plus récemment les vitraux de Wim Delvoye fabriqués à partir d'images radiographiques, qui ne sont pas sans lourdes connotations érotiques et scatologiques, ont apporté leur pierre à l'édifice en construction d'un fort ambigu art avant/post-religieux.
 4. Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2004, p. 197.
 5. Jen Bervin, *Nets*, Ugly Duckling Presse, New York 2003, non pag.

8

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?
 Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy;
 Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,
 4 Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?
 If the true concord of well-tunèd sounds,
 By unions married, do offend thine ear,
 They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
 8 **In singleness the parts** that thou shouldst bear.
 Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
Strike each in each by mutual ordering;
 Resembling sire, and child, and happy mother,
 12 Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing;
 Whose **speechless song, being many, seeming one**
 Sings this to thee: 'Thou single wilt prove none.'

De même, on peut encore lire les parties « censurées » de *The O Mission Repo* de Travis MacDonald (un effacement du *9/11 Commission Report* de la National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States) si le document source nous intéresse ou si l'on veut comprendre la nature des ajustements et des manipulations auxquels s'est livré l'effaceur. À l'instar de Bervin, MacDonald permet au lecteur d'accéder à la source textuelle intégrale en lui offrant simultanément, ou alternativement, de lire le nouveau texte qui émerge de l'oblitération partielle.

Chez MacDonald comme chez Bervin, les mots occultés, plutôt que d'être supprimés ou rendus illisibles par d'autres moyens, sont placés *sous rature* en un geste qui rappelle les gestes typographiques de Heidegger et de Derrida censés signaler la présence de mots inadéquats quoique nécessaires. L'analyse anti-métaphysique du langage de Heidegger et les ratures anti-logocentristes de Derrida offrent, chacune à leur façon mais non sans résonance, un modèle utile pour comprendre comment « fonctionne » l'art de l'effacement, en théorie comme en pratique. Ce qui est défait ou « déconstruit » ici, c'est moins la signification des mots — ou, plus généralement, la relation entre signifiant et signifié — que l'aporie familière de la déconstruction qui découle du fait que se demander si les mots peuvent vraiment signifier quelque chose n'est possible qu'en utilisant le langage lui-même.

Dissimulations, palimpsestes, noircissements et découpages

Si l'on voulait dresser une liste à peu près exhaustive des « effaceurs » poétiques contemporains, il faudrait citer : BIRD SANG de Stephen Ratcliffe (autre texte découpé dans les *Sonnets* de Shakespeare); *A Little White Shadow*, manuel

Called the United Airlines, sitting in 5E and 15F, joined Hijack in the first class cabin.¹⁷

Newark, United 02. Between 7:02 and 7:20, Saad al-Ghadi, Ahmed al-Nami, Ahmed al-Hamawi, and Ziad Jirah checked in at the United Airlines ticket counter for Flight 02, going to Los Angeles. Two checked baggage did not have screenshots 11, CAPPS II, checked 11 baggage screened for explosives and then loaded on the plane.¹⁸

The Commission passed through the security checkpoints owned by United Airlines and operated under contract by Air Security. Like the checkpoints in Boston, it lacked closed circuit television surveillance to detect incriminatory evidence to indicate when the hijackers passed through the checkpoints, what items have been triggered, or what security procedures were administered. The FAA interviewed the screeners but none recalled anything unusual or suspicious.¹⁹

The Commission loaded the plane between 7:20 and 7:49. All four had seats in the first class cabin; their plane had no business class cabin. Jirah was in seat 1B, closest to the cockpit. Nami was in 2C, Ghadi in 2D, and al-Hamawi in 6B.²⁰

The 40 men were aboard four transcontinental flights.²¹ They were planning to hijack these planes and turn them into large guided missiles, loaded with up to 11,000 gallons of jet fuel. By 9:00 a.m. on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, they had defeated all the security layers that America's civil aviation security system then had in place to prevent hijacking.

The Hijacking of American 11

American Airlines Flight 11 provided nonstop service from Boston to Los Angeles. On September 11, Captain John Ogonowski and First Officer Thomas McGuinness piloted the Boeing 767. It carried its full capacity of nine flight attendants. Eighty-one passengers boarded the flight with them (including the five terrorists).²²

The plane took off at 7:50 a.m. on 9/11 and climbed to 36,000 feet, just its initial assigned cruising altitude of 30,000 feet. All communication and flight procedures were normal. About this time the "Fasten Seatbelt" sign would usually have been turned off and the flight attendants would have begun preparing for cabin service.²³

At that same time, American 11 had its last routine communication with the ground when it acknowledged navigational instructions from the FAA's air traffic control (ATC) center in Boston. Sixteen seconds after that transmission, ATC instructed the aircraft's pilots to climb to 35,000 feet. That message and all subsequent attempts to contact the flight were not acknowledged. From this and other evidence, we believe the hijacking began at 8:11 a.m. shortly thereafter.²⁴

anonyme publié à la fin du XIX^e siècle « au bénéfice d'une maison de vacances pour jeunes ouvrières » et recouvert de Typex par Mary Ruefle; le *Blackout Newspaper* auto-explicatif d'Austin Kleon; la réduction des vers déjà elliptiques d'Emily Dickinson par Janet Holmes dans *The ms of my kin*; *Skybooths in the Breath somewhere* où David Dodd Lee efface Ashbery; le *Voyager* de Srikanth Reddy qui efface les mémoires de Kurt Waldheim; la fable carrollienne composée par l'auteur de cet article, *Ali e t o lo ss* (en collaboration avec la photographe Elisabeth Waltregny); et le livre d'artiste signé Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of*

Codes (2010), qui trouve *La Rue des crocodiles* de Bruno Schulz, permettant au lecteur de lire plusieurs pages à la fois et lui révélant donc des événements « futurs », un peu à la manière du *Albert Angelo* (1964) de B.S. Johnson. Il est à noter que la structure lacunaire du récit de Foer évoque la disparition de Schulz, assassiné par la Gestapo et la perte de nombre de ses manuscrits durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale¹.

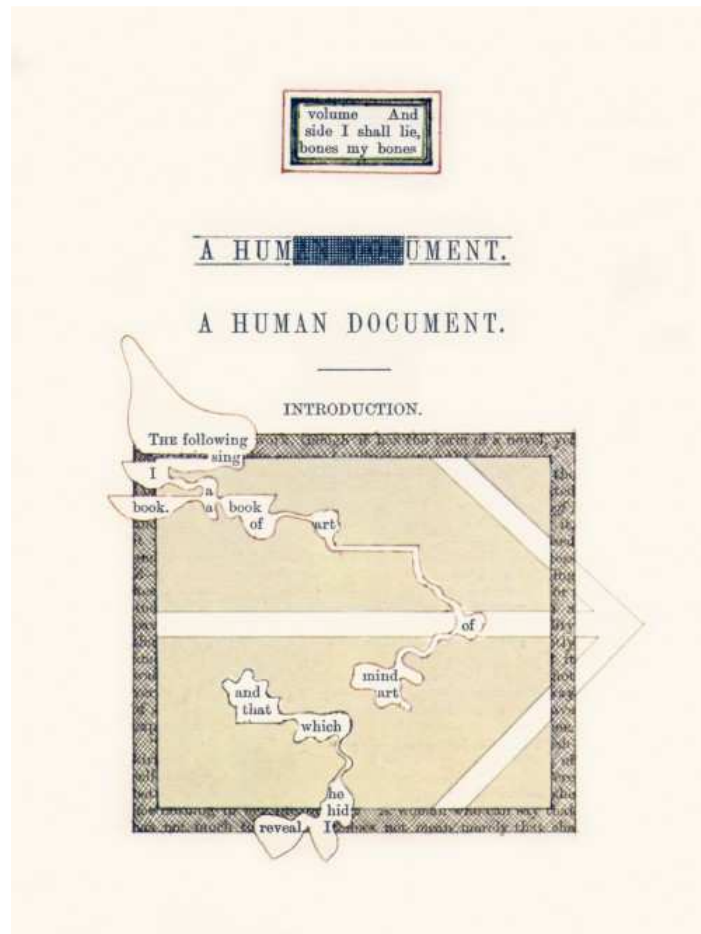
Si l'on se penche sur ces exemples récents, on constate que l'effacement recouvre en fin de compte des modes de destruction distincts. Il y a, pour faire simple, deux façons élémentaires de pratiquer l'effacement : la première consiste à biffer, occulter ou gommer totalement ou partiellement le texte-source ; la seconde implique la dissimulation du texte par des éléments textuels ou visuels qui possèdent en eux-mêmes, au-delà de leur capacité à voiler ou cacher, une valeur esthétique. Le collage de Crispin Glover, *Rat Catching* (effacement humoristique des *Studies in the Art of Rat-Catching* (1896) de Henry C. Barkley qui utilise gravures anciennes et autres œuvres trouvées) appartient clairement à la seconde catégorie. De même que les *Recycled Words* de Will Ashford (qui suit — d'un peu trop près — l'exemple de *A Humument* de Tom Phillips) ou *Of Lamb* de Matthea Harvey, un ouvrage taillé dans une biographie de Charles Lamb, traversé par la comptine « Mary had a little lamb » et enrichi par des illustrations de Amy Jean Porter.

Ex-humer

Si de plus en plus d'artistes expérimentaux contemporains recourent aux techniques de l'effacement, l'œuvre la plus accomplie reste, à ce jour et à nos yeux, celle de Tom Phillips : *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1966–2016). En « ex-humant » le cadavre d'un roman obscur de la fin du XIX^e siècle (le trois pont désormais oublié de W.H. Mallock, *A Human Document* [1892]), *A Humument* semble échapper à la logique de l'influence décrite par Bloom et constitue un cas singulier de réécriture dont la réussite surpasse d'évidence celle de son modèle (qu'on ne peut guère ranger parmi les classiques, même s'il est permis de considérer que Phillips s'attaque non pas à une œuvre mais bien à un genre établi et canonique, celui du *three-decker* victorien). L'effacement de Phillips consiste autant en recouvrements et additions qu'en annulations et soustractions : le livre est gorgé de poèmes visuels et de peintures poétiques qui surgissent comme autant de relectures successives décrites comme suit par l'« Inauteur » (« Unauthor² ») de l'ouvrage : « Quand j'ai commencé à travailler sur le livre à la

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1. On ne peut pas ne pas penser, en la circonstance, au fameux précédent oulipien de Georges Perec qui, dans *La Disparition*, offre une représentation lettriste de la Shoah, la disparition de la lettre e commémorant la suppression de tout un peuple.
 2. Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, quatrième édition, Thames and Hudson, Londres 2005, p. 113.

fin de 1966, j'ai simplement marqué à l'encre les mots indésirables. Et puis très vite m'est apparue la possibilité de fabriquer une unité supérieure entre le mot et l'image en les entretissant comme dans une miniature médiévale¹. » (Phillips mentionne ailleurs deux autres sources essentielles de son projet : les bandes dessinées et l'*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* de Francesco Colonna.) « Si bien que la peinture (à l'aquarelle ou à la gouache) », continue-t-il, « est devenue la technique de base, même si certaines pages sont encore réalisées uniquement à l'encre, et si d'autres utilisent la typo ou le collage de fragments issus d'autres parties du livre (puisque qu'une règle est née d'elle-même, aucun matériel extérieur au livre ne devait être utilisé)². »



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1. *Ibid.*, non pag.
 2. *Ibid.*, non pag.

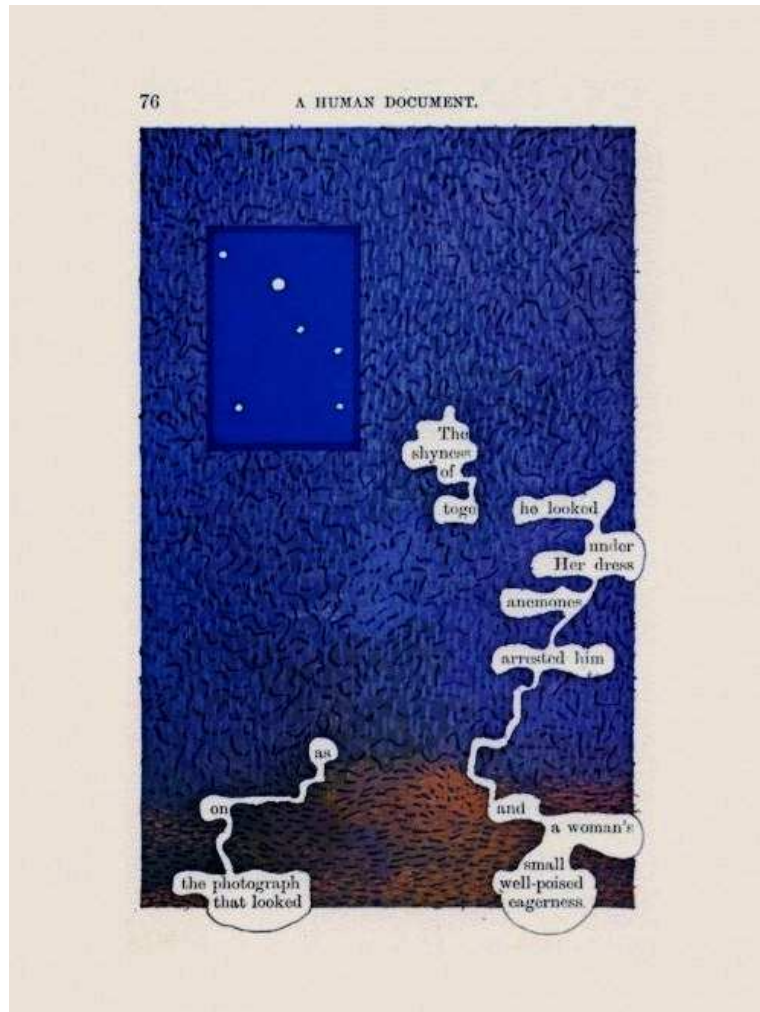
Même si ce recueil (à défaut d'un meilleur mot) recourt à une vaste palette de méthodes ou de styles de recouvrement, les pages traitées de *A Humument* ont un dénominateur commun : la présence de « bulles » évoquant les phylactères des bandes dessinées et qui contiennent les mots du roman de Mallock conservés par Phillips. L'auteur nomme ces bulles des « lézardes¹ », mot qu'il faut comprendre à la fois au sens métaphorique et au sens typographique. Un certain nombre de continuités conceptuelles assure, au fil des éditions, la cohérence et l'homogénéité du *work in progress* de Phillips. Parmi ces éléments, on peut citer la représentation d'intérieurs bourgeois (les fonds peints de certaines pages traitées rappellent souvent des murs, rideaux, papiers peints, fenêtres, tapisseries ou tapis et procurent un sentiment intime de foyer joliment miné par l'humour des « lézardes »), l'apparition de personnages fictionnels ou « textuels » récurrents tels Bill Toge (dont le nom est la contraction des mots « together » et « altogether » qui apparaissent souvent dans les pages du roman) et, de manière plus générale, l'émergence de fils thématiques hautement auto-réflexifs centrés sur l'idéologie victorienne qui traverse le roman de Mallock.

À l'instar d'autres textes envisagés jusqu'ici, *A Humument* privilégie, dans l'ensemble, la matérialité du texte sur sa signification. Mais cette option concrétiste ne doit pas cacher le fait que les lézardes poétiques qui traversent les pages traitées s'enracinent dans une véritable critique des stratégies idéologiques et représentatives du roman de Mallock. Comme le suggère l'ouverture de la 4^e édition de *A Humument* (« La suite / chante / je / un / livre / un / livre d'art / d' / art esprit / et / ce / que / lui / cache / révèle / je² »), l'objectif central des techniques d'oblitération de Phillips est précisément de cacher pour mieux révéler ce que le texte-source cherche à dissimuler.

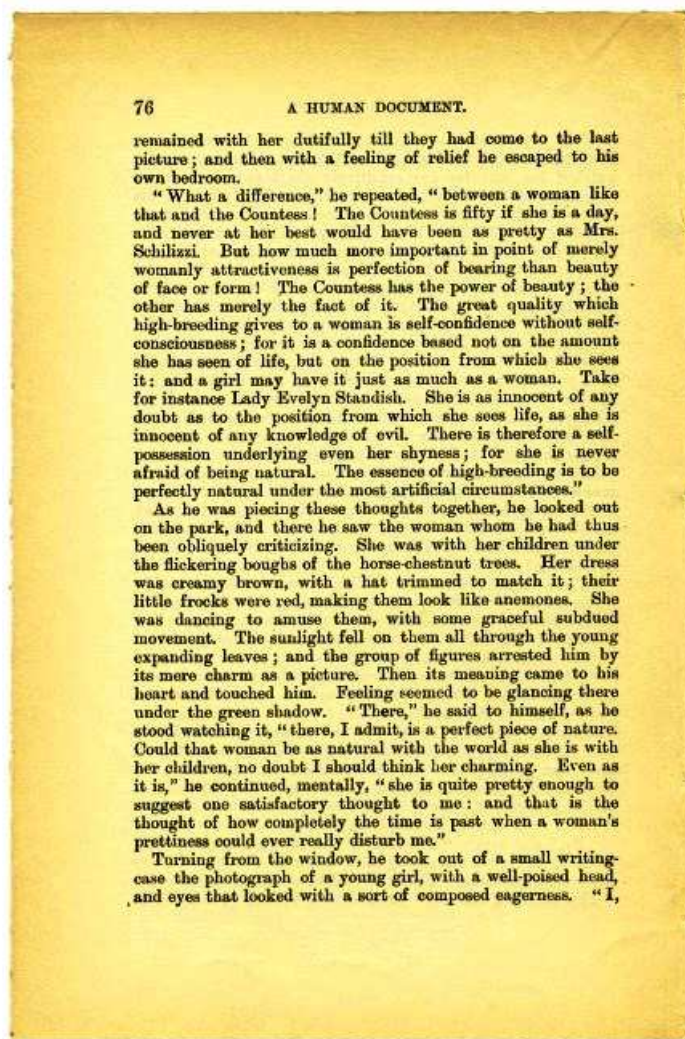
À cet égard, une lecture politique du livre de Phillips se doit donc de souligner les efforts faits pour « soigner » le roman de Mallock et le purger de ses tendances conservatrices, antisémites et misogynes (« nous / soignons / les livres / nous soignons / les romans³ ») en « déterrants » ses contenus latents réprimés. Au vu des « bulles » poétiques de Phillips, pleines de connotations sexuelles, il n'est guère exagéré de dire que *A Humument* s'efforce de psychanalyser *A Human Document*, mettant au jour les symptômes de la frustration psycho-sexuelle qui couvent dans la fiction de Mallock sous le vernis de respectabilité victorienne. Phillips explique que sa réécriture riche en sous-entendus avait pour but de « faire ressortir les blagues bizarres d'un roman qui n'en contient presque pas⁴ ».

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1. « Rivers » dans le texte original. Nous reprenons ici à notre compte la métaphore à la fois typographique et architecturale de la « lézarde » proposée par Francis Édeline (Francis Édeline, communication orale non publiée).
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
 4. Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, Fifth edition, Thames and Hudson, London 2012, non pag.

Page 76 de la 4^e édition, par exemple, une « timide » incarnation de Bill « Toge » essaie de regarder sous la jupe d'une femme mais se trouve « interpellé » par la vue (ou l'odeur) d'« anémones » avant de considérer l'inscrutable, « minuscule / et pleine de grâce / excitation¹ » de la femme. Une confrontation avec le texte-source produit son lot d'ironie et de paradoxe puisque la page originelle du roman de Mallock raconte une « histoire en miroir ». Robert Grenville, le héros du roman, s'est retiré dans sa chambre pour réfléchir aux vertus caractérisant les représentations traditionnelles de la femme victorienne (simplicité, modestie et « timidité ») et cela en examinant « la photographie d'une jeune fille, la tête pleine de grâce et les yeux qui vous fixaient avec une sorte d'excitation calme² ».



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1. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
 2. W.H. Mallock, *A Human Document*, Vol. 1, Chapman and Hall, London 1892, p. 182.



Dans la foulée de ce révisionnisme idéologique, le livre de Phillips — dont la sixième et dernière édition a vu le jour en 2016 (au terme de cette ultime édition, toutes les pages de Mallock ont été traitées au moins deux fois) — élabore un mode lyrique singulier, radicalement décentré, issu de la matrice textuelle même du roman (« Joindre / le souffle / écrit / au / cœur écrit / aux / nerfs / parlant / dans une / chemise / pour / enregistrer / toutes les maladies physiques / mais aucune / douleur de l'âme¹ »). La richesse et la profondeur textuelles de *A Humument*, ses complexités et tortuosités suffisent à prouver que la poétique de

1. Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, troisième édition, Thames and Hudson, London 1998, p. 246.

l'effacement n'est pas nécessairement condamnée à ce que pourrait laisser croire la célèbre formule de T.S. Eliot : « Les poètes immatures imitent; les poètes mûrs volent; les mauvais poètes estropient ce qu'ils prennent, tandis que les bons poètes le transforment en quelque chose de meilleur, ou au moins quelque chose de différent¹. »

(Traduit de l'anglais par Stéphane Bouquet.)

1. T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Waking Lion Press, West Valley 2011, p. 81.

From Gimmick to Exemplar: Erasure and the Art of Contemporary Poetry

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In a recently published poem, David Baker quotes an invitation to a reading of erasure poetry:

“Join us as several guest poets read from
and display their latest or landmark e-
rasures.” Which means: take Dickinson, rub
some letters out, you can be famous, too.
Because I could not stop for Death—make that
Be a cold sop. I stood at—. You get the
picture. Sappho: without time’s injury.¹

The longstanding Poetry Editor of *the Kenyon Review*, Baker is well positioned to identify “erasure” as “our poetry du jour” (SL 27). Objecting to what he sees as erasure’s fashionable ubiquity, he tartly describes multiple poets writing multiple works, overhyped as “their latest or landmark e-/rasures.” (SL 27). To dismiss the enterprise, Baker offers his own deliberately lackluster erasure of Dickinson’s line, “Because I could not stop for Death,” “Be a cold sop.”

Baker is not the first to criticize erasure poetry’s proliferation. “I’m not convinced that we need to have an ‘erased’ edition of every major work of the English language,” grumbled Ron Silliman. “Do we really need *EAVES OF ASS* or *OWL* or any of the other ‘edited’ masterworks that must surely be in the offing?”² The fact that these two poets of strikingly different artistic temperaments offer versions of the same complaint confirms the broader point. Less than a century after its introduction into English language poetry, erasure has enjoyed an astonishingly swift development. In particular, the last few decades witnessed an outpour-

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1. David Baker, *Scavenger Loop* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 27; hereafter cited in the text as *SL*.
 2. Ron Silliman blog, untitled post, March 19, 2009.

ing of examples, as poets erased a staggering number and variety of source texts, including Renaissance, Romantic, Modern, and contemporary poems, novels, biographies, legal, political, religious, journalistic, and military documents, and diaries.¹

Erasure poetry has grown sufficiently established that poets feel the need to vary its procedures. Assuming that a reader is “familiar with erasure poetry,” Sonnet L’Abbé offers she calls the “the not-opposite” of contemporary erasures of Shakespeare’s sonnets in her collection, *Sonnet’s Shakespeare*, “I make prose poems you’d have to erase to find Shakespeare again,”² she explains. Caroline Knox also reverses erasure’s usual procedures. Instead of erasing E.E. Cummings’s poems, she crafts the imagined precursor poems that E.E. Cummings could have erased to create his poems, “Song V” and “Song VI.” In other words, Knox’s appropriately titled “Source Text” offers an imagined source text for two pre-existing poems. Another poem in Knox’s collection, *Quaker Guns*, also playfully confirms that erasure poetry has reached the point where it feeds on itself. “Erasure Erasure,” erases the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of “erasure.”³

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1. In addition to examples discussed here, an extremely partial list would include Janet Homes, *The MS OF M Y K I N* (Bristol, UK: Shearsman Books, 2009), Laura Wetherington, *Dick Erasures*, (Derbyshire, UK: Red Ceilings Press, 2011), ebook. Michael Koshkin, *Parad e R ain* (Washington, DC: Big Game Books, 2006), Travis Macdonald, *The O Mission Repo* (Denver: Fact-Simile Editions, 2008), Stephen Radcliffe, *[where last the sweet] Birds Sang* (Oakland, CA: O Books, 1989), Jen Bervin, *NETS* (Berkeley, CA: Ugly Duck Press, 2004), David Lee Dodd, *Sky Booths in the Breath Somewhere: The Ashbery Erasure Poems* (Buffalo, New York: Blaze-Vox, 2010), Matthea Harvey, *Of Lamb* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2011), Yedda Morrison, *Darkness* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2012), Mary Ruefle, *A Little White Shadow* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2006) and Joshua Beckman, Anthony McCann and Matthew Rohrer, *Gentle Reader!* (Seattle: Wave Books 2007), and poems in Paul Vermeersch, *Don’t Let It End Like This Tell I Said Something* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2014) and Timothy Green, *American Fractal* (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2009). Nonliterary source texts are erased in Amaranth Borsuk, *Tonal Saw* (Brooklyn: The Song Cave, 2010), Philip Metres, *Sand Opera* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2015), Srikanth Reddy, *Voyager* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2011, Jimmy McInnes, *A More Perfect I* (Toronto: BookThug, 2015), M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), Solmaz Sharif, *Look* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016), Jessica Piazza and Heather Aimee O’Neill, *Obliterations* (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press; 2016) and Alison Thumel, “Six Erasure Poems,” *Rumpus*, March 26, 2017. Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (London, The Tetrad Press Edition, 1970) is an important early work in novel and art book erasure. The publisher of several of these books, Wave Books features on their website a program and source texts to facilitate more erasure poetry. The source texts include passages from Virginia Woolf, Aristophanes, and Herman Melville. See Wave Books, “Erasures,” web. For a discussion of erasure’s recent popularity, see Rachel Stone, “The Trump-Era Boom in Erasure Poetry,” *The New Republic*, October 23, 2017.
 2. “The Pitch: Sonnet’s Shakespeare,” *Partisan*, August 18, 2015, web.
 3. Caroline Knox, *Quaker Guns* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2008), 29, 59

To understand this situation, I will trace three stages in the development of erasure poetry, focusing on the possibilities that the most resourceful poets discovered in each. I am less interested in decrying or celebrating a trend than in recognizing how the technique allowed several generations of poets to pursue a shifting set of artistic concerns, how it helped them to address the complex nature of their modernist inheritance, the challenge of responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis, and, most recently, poetry's relation to the most pernicious form of language, namely, political and legal justifications of violence and war. In short, I will examine the technique's flexibility, its openness to contradictory aims, temperaments, and influences. Since the techniques that a literary culture favors mark its affinities and aversions, erasure's development expresses more than any particular authors' preferences. Attention to it clarifies the art of contemporary poetry.

Erasure entered Anglo-American poetry as a pedagogic exercise. In 1931, Ezra Pound assigned Basil Bunting the task of editing Shakespeare's sonnets, "correcting" them according to Pound's precepts. The exercise took place at Pound's informal university in Rapallo—the "Eziversity"—where Bunting joined a number of younger poets to learn under Pound's tutelage. Notably, the task of improving Shakespeare's sonnets primarily entailed eliminating superfluous words and phrases; it did not involve expansion, whether by enlarging underdeveloped passages or introducing new images or ideas. Bunting slashed the sonnets, drawing lines across the words he saw as expendable as well as occasionally reworking syntax to remove inversions. For instance, he cut the entire final couplet of sonnet 104, "For fear of which, hear this thou age unbred, / Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead," and reduced the final couplet of sonnet 103, "And more, much more, than in my verse can sit, / Your own glass shows you when you look in it," to a single unmetrical, ten syllable line, "Your glass shows you more, much more, than my verse." Other sonnets received even more extensive excisions. A large "X" appears to expunge all of sonnet 21, with the possible exception of its final line, "I will not praise that purpose not to sell."¹

Helen Vendler has called these results "barbarous"² and from the perspective of a scholar of Shakespeare's sonnets they very well might be. The exercise's primary aim, however, was not to deface the sonnets; the erasures demonstrated how poetry should be composed, in particular, how a draft might be edited with

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1. Massimo Bacigalupo, *Ezra Pound, Un Poeta a Rapallo* (Genova: Edizioni S. Marco dei Giustiniani, 1985), 75, contains a description of the exercise, as well as a copy of several of the sonnets edited by Bunting. See also *Basil Bunting, "Shakespeare's Sonnets Edited," introduced by Richard Caddel, Sharp Study and Long Toil: Basil Bunting Special Issue*, Durham University Journal Supplement, 1995, 48-22, which includes images of other Shakespeare sonnets as edited by Bunting. I date the exercise by Bunting's letter to Harriet Monroe, dated July, 13, 1931, which describes it and which I will discuss shortly.
 2. Helen Vendler, "Reading, Stage by Stage," *Shakespeare Reread: The Texts in New Contexts*, Russ McDonald, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 29.

the proper ruthlessness. When Bunting showed Pound a draft of his poem, “Villon,” Pound applied the same method he instructed Bunting to use on Shakespeare’s sonnets. As Bunting later recalled, Pound “took out a blue pencil and scratched out about half the poem.”¹ The work of other participants at the Ezuversity received nearly the same treatment. Pound, James Laughlin remembered, “read / My poems and crossed out half the / Words saying I didn’t need them” while Louis Zukofsky plaintively responded to Pound’s recommendation that he “cut” his poem “A” “down to about half of what it is now,” “I wish I could see what to cut, there’s nothing I wd. enjoy more.”²

The process of the editing Shakespeare’s sonnets, then, suggestively mimicked the process of poetic composition. To edit Shakespeare’s sonnets was to see how to edit one’s own drafts. It is not surprising, then, that some participants in the Ezuversity started to explore—albeit tentatively—the next logical step, cutting Shakespeare’s poems to create new poems of their own, treating Shakespeare’s work as their drafts. Writing to *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe, Bunting reported:

I am engaged in rewriting Shakespeare’s sonnets. They can do with it! After sufficient cutting and straightening out of inversions, rather a nice poem should emerge.³

After returning to England, Bunting repeated the exercise. “I used to take with me a copy of Shakespeare’s sonnets,” he told a friend, “I’d concentrate on a few, and see what would happen when I cut out every single word that I, Basil Bunting, considered unnecessary.”⁴ Despite Bunting’s hope that “rather a nice poem should emerge,” he never published the experiment’s results, apparently dissatisfied with them.

Taking up the formal challenge, another Pound disciple produced a suggestive exercise. In *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, Louis Zukofsky cut two-thirds of a short speech by Camillo in *Winter’s Tale* in order to create his version:

rooted... affection...
shook hands, as if over a vast;
and embrac’d, as it were, from the ends
of opposed winds.
The heavens continue their loves!⁵

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1. Quoted in Basil Bunting, *The Poems of Basil Bunting*, Don Share, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), Kindle edition.
 2. James Laughlin, *Byways: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1984), 2005), 85 and Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*, Barry Ahearn, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1987), 112-113.
 3. Poetry Magazine papers 1912-1936, Box 30, Folder 23, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library.
 4. “Denis Goucher Talks about Basil Bunting,” *Sharp Study and Long Toil: Basil Bunting Special Issue*, Durham University Journal Supplement, 1995, 206-207.
 5. Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 377; hereafter cited in the text as *B*.

Introducing these lines, Zukofsky stated their point, “That with no Chinese it is possible to have Rihaku (Li Po)” (B 377). Glossing this pronouncement, Hugh Kenner acknowledged that Zukofsky’s poem contains far more Pound than Li Po. Zukofsky, Kenner noted, “discerned a Chinese poem (in *Cathay* English).”¹ Even with Kenner’s qualification in mind, Zukofsky’s presumptiveness remains undeniable: he implies that Shakespeare’s lines contain within them a Tang Dynasty poem awaiting discovery by a reader who knows “no Chinese.” As with Pound’s *Cathay* poems, Zukofsky’s lines might be criticized for their contribution to what Timothy Yiu calls “the tradition of celebrating Chinese culture while erasing real, living Chinese people.”² Zukofsky’s poetic practice and the theory that underpins it also resist the limits that Orientalism sets. Approaching the middle of his writing career, Zukofsky developed an understanding of all art and artists as contemporary to each other, a phenomena he witnessed in startling moments of mutual recognition, “instances from ‘different’ cultures surprisingly inwreathed / Seem to look back at one another,” as he would soon describe it. Zukofsky’s discovery of Shakespeare in Li Po offers an intimation of this possibility: “none has to read the other yet it happens.”³

Once this exercise appeared in print, Zukofsky explored the principles underpinning it. Inspired by the index for *Bottom*, which he prepared, Zukofsky selected words and phrases from the various references to “horses” that the index catalogues and composed lines for his new poem, “A”-14, from them.⁴ The quotations follow the chronology of their appearance in *Bottom*. The majority originate in Shakespeare’s plays, but others arise from source texts as different as George Bernard Shaw’s recently revived play, *The Apple Cart: A Political Extravaganza*, *The Book of Enoch*, and, most revealingly, one of Zukofsky’s own comments from *Bottom*. The phrases from Shakespeare are italicized; those from others sources are not. The italics obscure a greater distinction. In one sense, “A”-14 erases multiple source texts, with Shakespeare as the base. In another sense, “A-14” erases a single text as all the quotations, even Zukofsky’s own words, are taken from the indexed references in *Bottom*. In this respect, the poem tests a new technique of

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1. Hugh Kenner, “Foreword,” *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky*, Expanded Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), ix. See also H.D.’s account of how Pound “pruned my *Hermes of the Ways*, a rough transcription of a short poem from the Greek Anthology, into *vers libre*” in H.D., *Magic Mirror, Compassionate Friendship, Thorn Thicket: A Tribute to Erich Heydt*, Nephie Christodoulides, ed. (Victoria, BC: ELS, 2012), 96.
 2. Timothy Yu, “White Poets Want Chinese Culture Without Chinese People,” *New Republic*, April 8, 2016. See also Yu’s *100 Chinese Silences* (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2016) for a poetic critique of this tradition.
 3. Louis Zukofsky, “A” (New York: New Directions, 2011), 175-176; hereafter cited in text as A.
 4. My account of the composition of “A”-14 and its source texts draws from Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas’s website, “Z-site: A Companion to the Works of Louis Zukofsky,” which contains invaluable annotations to Zukofsky’s poems.

erasure—the creation of a text by cutting words from a single preexisting source—and departs from the previous model of Modernist poetic collage, the juxtaposition of disparate materials taken from multiple sources, most famously, in “The Waste Land” and “The Cantos.”¹

The passage in “A”-14 deserves to be called the first poetic erasure in English, composed primarily as a new poem, not an illustration or a pedagogical exercise. The passage begins self-deprecatingly, with Celia Zukofsky jokingly referring to her husband’s “horse complex,”² but horses are more than Zukofsky’s favorite motif. Their erasures achieve multiple, wide ranging effects. Horses offer Zukofsky artistic material and a justification of his. The fact that so many other writers depicted horses offers Zukofsky ample opportunities and materials for erasure. The animal’s appearance throughout different historical periods, genres, and cultures also supports his belief in creative “recurrence,” the principle that artists return to the same images and concerns, both deliberately and unknowingly, as an earlier section in “A” puts it:

The horse sees he is repeating
All known cultures
And suspects repeating
Others unknown to him.³

Some of Zukofsky’s most interesting erasures strain to make this rather expansive point. They reveal the difficulty of aligning different cultures so they might “look back at one another” in agreement, not contestation or condescension.

One passage, for instance, describes horses’ transformative experience of music then abruptly insists on its strict limits:

*music touch their
ears, eyes turn’d*

modest gaze—

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1. See, for example, David Antin’s classic formulation, “*The Waste Land* and the *Cantos* are based on the principle of collage, the dramatic juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements” in David Antin, *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 169. Twitchell-Waas notes one exception a quotation from a translation of Homer “not actually quoted in *Bottom* but is referenced at 352.” See “A”-14 on “Z-site: A Companion to the Works of Louis Zukofsky.”
 2. Louis Zukofsky, “A”-14, *Poetry*, CVII: 42, October 1965, 351; hereafter cited in the text as *PO*. See *A*, 804, where Zukofsky refers to the “work in / its recurrence.”
 3. Louis Zukofsky, “A” (New York: New Directions, 2001), 175. See also Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker Hoard, 2007), 379, which discusses the importance Zukofsky placed on “recurrence” and the creative use he made of horses. *The Poem of a Life* is hereafter cited in the text as *PL*.

destroyed if changed
into a man. (PO 352)

An examination of Zukofsky's erasures clarifies his method. The first part culls phrases from an excerpt of Lorenzo's famous speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Lorenzo praises "the sweet power of music." The arts—foremost, music and poetry—civilize but not indiscriminately. They only civilize those capable of accepting their influence. As Lorenzo makes clear, this responsiveness distinguishes potentially enlightened, moral humanity, "The man that hath no music in himself, / Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, / [...]. Let no such man be trusted."¹ Of course such a man haunts the play. Earlier in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock rails against music and theater: "Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter / My sober house" (*MV* 253). Shylock's hatred of the arts, therefore, condemns him as less than fully human.

Excerpting Lorenzo's speech in *Bottom*, Zukofsky cuts its barbed clinching line, "Let no such man be trusted." In "A"-14, Zukofsky deepens this revision to challenge the religious and ethnic hierarchies that Lorenzo expresses. Working chronologically through his source text, *Bottom*, Zukofsky skips over two indexed quotations about horses—one from Shakespeare, the other from Mozart—before settling on a telling inspiration. Zukofsky reworks a long passage in which Baruch Spinoza observes that "one essence or form" cannot be "changed" "into another," illustrating the point, "[A] horse would be equally destroyed if it were changed into a man as if it were changed into an insect" (*B* 421). Zukofsky truncates Spinoza's extended prose into two short verse lines: "destroyed if changed / into a man."

Expanding the implied definition of humanity beyond Christians, Zukofsky's erasures recast a distinction into an affinity. Responsiveness to art still distinguishes the essence of humanity, but this sensitivity transcends religious categories. Reworked through Zukofsky's erasures, Spinoza finishes Lorenzo's thought. In the place of Shakespeare's lyrical, moonlit evocations, Zukofsky creates a terse, difficult music composed of erased passages. Instead of having "no music," a Jew creates the art that verifies the listener's humanity.

The particular historical and artistic pressures that Zukofsky faced encouraged this strategy. Only a few lines after the erasures, Zukofsky notes an item in the *New York Times*, "*The Times* crossword / / puzzle 'Across / 4 / Pound, poet'" (*PO* 352). The four-word answer, "Ezra," underscores how Zukofsky's relationship with Ezra Pound—his mentor, friend, inspiration, and irritant—could hardly be summarized so neatly.

1. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, John Drakakis, ed. (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 374; hereafter cited in the text as *MV*.

The fascist views Pound increasingly espoused strained the two poets' relationship and complicated Zukofsky's task of claiming Pound as a poetic influence. "I never felt the least trace of anti-Semitism in his presence," Zukofsky diplomatically observed, avoiding the fact that the vast majority of their communication took place through correspondence.¹ Privately Zukofsky was more candid. In a scathing letter he sent Pound, Zukofsky heatedly objected to Pound's assessment that the Rothschilds, not Hitler, bore responsibility for the Jews' persecution. Describing himself as not "a very Jewish Jew," Zukofsky castigated Pound, writing that "your Fascist position" is "not worth one's time looking at, let alone worth intelligent discussion." "[L]et's not correspond about politics, etc." the letter tartly ends.² Pound's wartime broadcasts over Rome Radio only intensified Zukofsky's ambivalence. "I'd hate to see him shot," he told a friend after Pound's arrest, "but that's what he deserves."³

Erasure allowed Zukofsky to measure what he took from Pound. When Zukofsky extends the modernist techniques of montage and collage into the new technique of erasure, he emphasizes the process of selection: that a poet must forge a discerningly partial relationship to the words and the influences he inherits. To express his affinities, he must mark their limits. Effective literary influence relies on discernment; a poet must exclude the unattractive aspects of even the most productive influences. It was not hard for the poet who identifies himself in "A"-14 as "Jewish / from New York City" (*PO* 327) to hear Lorenzo's words, "Let no such man be trusted," echo though modernist definitions of culture, whether in Eliot's advocacy of a "homogenous population" that regards "any large number of free-thinking Jews" as "undesirable" or Pound's defense of eugenics, "Breed GOOD and preserve the race. Breed thorough, that is, for thoroughbreds [...] That means EUGENICS as opposed to race suicide."⁴ Rooted in his belief that all cultures are wholly intermingled, Zukofsky's erasures allowed him both to insist on his particular religious, ethnic, and geographic identity, "Jewish / from New York City," and to assert that all artists share a certain purpose, even amidst their antagonisms.

Restlessly other passages in "A"-14 vary its erasure method. "A"-14 contains three other passages constructed out of quotations, each "stitched together from

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1. Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions: The Collected Essays of Louis Zukofsky* (London: Rapp and Carroll, 1967), 157. Scroggins calls Zukofsky's point "disingenuous" (*PL* 220).
 2. Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, Pound/Zukofsky: *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*, Barry Ahearn, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1987), 199 and 198. See the editorial note on page 198 for a discussion of the context for Zukofsky's letter.
 3. Quoted in *PL*, 209.
 4. T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber, 1933), 19-20. Pound is quoted in Alec Marsh, *John Kasper and Ezra Pound: Saving the Republic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 85.

very small snippets”¹: quotations from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* paired with quotations from Henry James’s “The Tone of Time,” quotations from *Paradise Lost* combined with quotations from Milton’s prose and James Holly Hanford’s biographical introduction to *The Poems of John Milton* (including his paraphrases of Milton), and quotations from a translation of Michel de Montaigne’s *The Autobiography of Michel de Montaigne*. Briefer, more conventionally excerpted quotations also abound. The erasures’ effects range from the topical (one example introduces the violent suppression of a black civil rights march) to the vainglorious (Zukofsky’s implicit comparison of his life and artistic career with those of his assumed peers: Conrad, Milton, and Montaigne).²

Poetry Magazine devoted its entire October 1965 issue to “A”-14, supplemented with appreciative essays about Zukofsky’s poetry and criticism. In what must have been a welcome break from his history of publishing difficulties, Zukofsky “had”—as the editors put it—the “full issue of *Poetry*” “to himself.” (PO 72) Showcased in a prestigious venue, Zukofsky’s pioneering erasures, though, largely failed to attract the attention of readers who did not specifically follow his work. The intervening decades made this unfortunate fact increasingly obvious. Even as erasure grew in popularity and influence, few readers beyond Zukofsky experts recognize “A”-14 as an important work in its development. A number of later accounts of the technique do not mention “A”-14, let alone discuss it, and erasure poets rarely cite it as an influence.³ Instead of erasure, poets are more likely to associate “A”-14 with the other innovation it introduces: the organization of lines by word count, what Zukofsky called “words / you count” (PO 1).

Shrewdly and resourcefully, the author of the first major collection of erasure poetry, though, realized the opportunities that “A”-14 introduced, as well as the need to refocus them. Ronald Johnson read and admired Zukofsky’s work. First published in nineteen-seventy-seven, Johnson’s *Radi os* erases the first four books of *Paradise Lost*, returning to a source text borrowed from “A”-14. Recognizing the promise hidden in “A”-14, Johnson concentrates solely on *Paradise Lost*, excluding even closely related texts such as Milton’s prose and biographical material. Taking pains to foreground and clarify his method, Johnson names the source text in his title and describes his motivations in an author’s note that pre-

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1. I borrow this phrase from Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, “choral out / of random input”: “A”-14,” unpublished manuscript, 27.
 2. On the second point, see Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 160.
 3. See, for example, the extensive group interview of six poets who write erasure poetry, none of whom mention Zukofsky, Andrew David King, “The Weight of What’s Left [Out]: Six Contemporary Erasure Poets on Their Craft” *Kenyon Review*, Online November 6, 2012, as well as Travis Macdonald, “A Brief History of Erasure Poetics,” *Jacket* 38, 2009, and Jeannie Vanasco, “Absent Things as if They Were Present,” *Read Harder: Five More Years of Great Writing from the Believer*, Ed Park and Heidi Julavits, eds. (San Francisco, McSweeney’s, 2014), 89-108.

cedes the poems. Adding visual reminders, each page of *Radi os* retains the layout of the particular edition Johnson used as his source text; each keeps the page divisions and the words' placement within them.

These strategies quietly depart from the example of "A"-14. Zukofsky arranged the borrowed words into verses lines based in word count and did not offer his readers an introduction to his powerfully challenging, disorienting work. "A"-14, Zukofsky's biographer Mark Scroggins observes, "shifts through a dizzying array of Zukofskyan source texts." (*PL* 387). Adding to the complications, "A"-14 employs a dizzying array of methods to address the heterogeneous material, including homophonic translation, transliteration, etymological word play, and quotation, as well as erasure. Out of all this abundance, Johnson selects one possibility and explicitly commits to it. "A"-14 has been called "a notably imperious poem," "a sampler of aggressive mastery in language and design," "unsurpassed but yet also hermetic, sealed."¹ Johnson unseals a technique and tempers its aggressiveness.

Johnson's emphasis on selection, the exclusion of potential materials and techniques, announces a compelling ambition. Paradoxically, *Radi os* enlarges the scope of "A"-14 by setting a more defined formal limit: the entire book arises from the erasures of a single epic poem. In subject matter and style, Johnson reexamines the previous generations' commitments. If Modernism stressed the importance of revision, defined as the cutting of the inessential, Johnson's erasures expanded revision to comprise the entire composition process. The erasures literalized a particular reading of Modernism: they performed what Frederic Jameson calls "the quintessential modern gesture": "one of taboo rather than of discovery [...] modernism is seen as originating in an ever-keener distaste for what is conventional and outmoded."²

The source text Johnson borrowed from Zukofsky, *Paradise Lost*, nicely served this purpose since, to many authorities, it represented exactly that: the "conventional and outmoded." "Pound has made 'Miltonic' a derogatory epithet,"³ Richard Ellman reported only a few years before Johnson wrote *Radi os*. To accomplish this aim, Pound offered caustic polemics, if not outright abuse, in both conversation and print. "Milton," Pound observed, "is the worst sort of poi-

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1. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley, and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 76.
 2. Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 126-127. I would like to thank my colleague Mark Allison for drawing my attention to this passage.
 3. Richard Ellman, "Ez and Old Billyum" in *New Approaches to Ezra Pound*, Eva Hesse (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 64; hereafter cited in text as *EOB*. See also James Longenbach, *The Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), which presents an alternative understanding of the degree to which Pound influenced Yeats's work.

son" (*LEEP* 216). Others contributed more measured, effective attacks. Noting "Milton's dislodgement" "after his two centuries of predominance," F.R. Leavis matter-of-factly assigned credit, "The irresistible argument, of course, was Mr. Eliot's creative achievement."¹ Eliot's most prominent essay on Milton, "A Note on the Verse of Milton," acknowledged Pound's earlier criticism, that Milton's "misdeeds as a poet have been called attention to, as by Mr. Ezra Pound, but usually in passing." Offering more sustained censure, Eliot similarly decried Milton as an eternally harmful influence. "Milton's poetry could *only* be an influence for the worse, upon any poet whatever," charged Eliot. Calling Milton "an influence against which we still have to struggle," Eliot asserted, "he may be still considered as having done damage to the English language from which it has not wholly recovered."²

This literary history provides one context to understand *Radi os*. Though the intervening years witnessed several defenses of Milton launched against Pound's and Eliot's positions, they did not displace the view that "Milton was disallowed" "from the main track of poetry."³ Redirecting this criticism, Johnson frees *Paradise Lost* from Milton's influence. At the same time, *Radi os* complicates this reading. In his author's note to *Radi os*, Johnson specifies the publication date of the edition he erases, even before he mentions anything else, "The type stands as is: the 'words' are those of an 1892 edition of *Paradise Lost*."⁴

The apparently minor detail is meaningful, perhaps even poignant. Published in the last decade of the late nineteenth-century, Johnson's source text houses a vulnerable poem⁵: the edition Johnson owned was one of the last to appear before a new generation of readers attacked *Paradise Lost* and its author. To erase the 1892 edition was to straddle that history.

Consider the first page of *Radi os*:

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1. F. R. Leavis, *Evaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 42.
 2. T.S. Eliot, *On Poets and Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 156, 157, 164; hereafter cited in the text as *PP*. To a certain extent, Eliot later moderated these views but his earlier attack on Milton remains the most influential. See "Milton II," *PP* 165-183.
 3. The phrase is Robert Duncan's, who tried to reclaim Milton for a Poundian poetics, and quoted in Sarah E. Ehlers illuminating essay, "Robert Duncan's Miltonic Persuasion: The Emergence of a Radical Poetic," *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons, eds. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 6. Notable scholarly defenses of Milton included Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) and Frank Kermode, ed., *The Living Milton: Essays by Various Hands* (London: Routledge, 1960).
 4. Ronald Johnson, *Radi os* (Chicago: Flood Edition, 2005), ix; hereafter cited in the text as *R*.
 5. See John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of Paradise Lost, 1667-1970, Volume II: Interpretative Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 169, where he observes, "[N]ineteenth-century critics left Milton vulnerable."

O

tree
 into the World,
 Man

the chosen

Rose out of Chaos:

song, (R 3)

Even after attacks diminished the poem's status, the opening of *Paradise Lost* remains among the most famous lines in English language literary history. A reader of *Radi os* might be expected to have in mind the passage Johnson erases and register the excisions' force:

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
 Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
 Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
 With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
 Sing Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
 Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
 That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed
 In the beginning how the heavens and earth
 Rose out of *Chaos*: or, if *Sion* hill
 Delight thee more, and *Siloa's* Brook that flowed
 Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song.¹

Johnson cut one-hundred-and-one words and four-hundred-and-forty-nine characters down to thirteen words and fifty characters. He did so selectively and to specific effect.

Pound criticized Milton's "passion for Latinization," pithily charging, "Milton got into a mess trying to write English as if it were Latin."² The opening page of *Radi os* accordingly excises all Latinate words except one, "Chaos," the state Man rises from, as if leaving behind a bad history, Milton's Latinization of English and the troubles it causes. In the place of Milton's Latinate wordplay and cross-linguistic puns, *Radi os* opens with a severely restricted vocabulary. No

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1. I rely of the first page of *Paradise Lost* as presented in an opening, unnumbered page in the 2005 edition of *Radi os*, although with some reservations, as this text does not reproduce the details of the edition of *Paradise Lost* Johnson used.
 2. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, T.S. Eliot, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1968), 238 and 40; hereafter cited in the text as *LEEP*.

word consists of more than six letters. *Radi os* also revises Milton's Latinate syntax, starting with the first erasure, the second letter of *Paradise Lost*. The first two lines of *Paradise Lost* conspicuously start with "Of": "Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree." By cutting the "P" in the first "Of," Johnson changes the word's grammatical function from a preposition to an exclamation, from a part of speech that facilitates the exploration of relationships to one often associated with poetic intensity. Emphasizing concision and wonder, these revisions impatiently remove the elaborate syntax that extends the first sentence of *Paradise Lost* for sixteen lines, the entire first page of the edition Johnson uses. In short, Johnson guts Milton's Latinate syntax and diction, his famously grand style.

Johnson's excisions also grapple with Eliot's more extensive criticisms. Chastising Milton, Eliot castigated "a theology that I find in large part repellent, expressed through a mythology which would have better been left in the Book of Genesis, upon which Milton has not improved" (*PP* 162). Johnson adjusts Milton's theology and excises his mythology. Most obviously, Johnson eliminates the epic invocation that dominates the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's poet beseeches the "Heavenly Muse" for assistance, appealing to precedent by naming the places where divine communication previously took place ("of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*") and those who received it (such as Moses, "That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed"). In contrast, Johnson does beseech any authority, whether human or divine, to inspire him. He cuts every word of Milton's appeal to the muse, "I thence / Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song," with sole exception of the last word, the shared aim of "song." Unaided, the literary creation simply appears, introduced only by a colon: "Rose out of chaos: // song." Where Milton presents a fallen world in need of redemption, "and all our woe, / With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man / Restore us," Johnson slashes nearly everything. The one exception, the one word he does keep, "Man," no longer refers to Jesus but self-created (and self-creating) humanity. The epithet, "Man // The chosen" continues the displacement of Milton's religious language, naming "Man," not the ancient Israelites, as "the chosen." The source of humanity's greatness, "the chosen" also implicitly names the poem's method; *Radi os* presents a "song" made by selection.

Reworking *Paradise Lost*, Johnson moderates Eliot's criticism: Johnson gives the impression that he finds Milton's theology less "repellent" than simply outdated. For this reason, Johnson's often-startling revisions of *Paradise Lost* are never burlesque. They lack the vindictive charge, for instance, of Bunting's desecration of Milton's tender elegy to his wife, "Methought I saw my late espoused saint," rewritten to express contemptuous boredom, "I was not pleased, it was

shocking to see a ghost so I cut her and went and sat amongst the rank watergrasses by the Tyne.”¹

Two landmark publications inform Johnson’s method and its implications. Both books appeared in 1971, only a few years before Johnson wrote *Radi os*, one offering him inspiration, the other confirmation. “I never am without Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*,” Johnson told creative-writing students, “With only that as a map you could find your way.”² In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner remapped Modernism and the twentieth century with Pound at their center, explicating Pound’s influence and techniques. In a tour-de-force chapter, “The Muse in Tatters,” Kenner described how Pound, a trained classicist, drew inspiration from unrestored classical fragments: “Fragments of a fragment grow into radiant gists.”³ The appreciation of this fact, Kenner observes, demonstrates an important change in sensibility, “Sensitivity to detailed sculptured forms makes tolerable—cherishable—in our museums fragments a former generation would have eked out with more plaster than there is marble.” (*PE* 67). To demonstrate this idea, Kenner presents stanzas from two poems, Marianne Moore’s “The Steeple-Jack” and Pound’s Canto CIX, both revised to resemble classical fragments. To use a perhaps anachronistic term, Kenner offered his erasures of them. Even with their words removed and elisions bracketed, a reader would recognize which poem belongs to which poet, Kenner concluded.

The same test might also be applied to Johnson’s erasures of Milton. Following Kenner’s particular reading of Modernism, Johnson movingly celebrates “the radiant gists” of fragments in an erasure of a passage from Book III of *Paradise Lost*:

The radiant image

the only
Garden.

On the bare outside of this World,

No bars of Hell, nor

Far off Heaven

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1. Basil Bunting, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 9.
 2. Ronald Johnson, “Hurrah for Euphony Dedicated to the Young Poets,” *The Cultural Society*, Jan. 14, 2002, online.
 3. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971), 66; hereafter cited as *PE*.

And Man there placed,

the sole command

create

or love (R 51)

Johnson's erasures severely contract Milton's panoramic survey of creation. Fortrightly excising Milton's theological hierarchies, they deny Milton's heaven and his hell ("No bars of Hell, nor / / Far off Heaven") and remove any vision of divinity, both of God and Jesus. Words shift from religious to secular and poetic contexts. Instead of referring to Jesus, "his only son," "only" modifies an all-encompassing earth, the "the only / Garden." Even more strikingly, the source of radiance shifts from a heavenly Jesus to worldly verse technique, when *Radi os* recasts "the radiant image of his Glory sat / His only Son" into "The radiant image."

Both quantitatively and qualitatively, Johnson erases Milton more thoroughly than Kenner erases Moore and Pound. With deeper cuts, Johnson removes the very qualities often associated with Milton, whether in praise or in condemnation—Milton's sonorous Latinate diction and ornate syntax organized in heavily enjambed iambic pentameter. Even in this revision of a less well-known passage, though, Milton's language and structures, severely truncated and fragmented, remain recognizably his. The fact that it is possible to hear other echoes—of Blake, Robert Duncan, and, more distantly, Emerson and Poe¹—only buttresses the point. Certain distinctive features persist. Just as the first sentence of *Paradise Lost* takes six lines to introduce its verb, "Sing," *Radi os* finds its first sentence's verb, "Rose" at that same point. Both poems build to that syntactic revelation. If Johnson eschews Milton's classical invocation, modernizing, secularizing, and depopulating it, he does so with an apostrophe—"the O / / Of / / wonder," (R 90), another section of *Radi os* calls it—so Milton's technique stands nearly visible just outside the new poem's torn margins. Even when stripped off its Latinate preference, the vocabulary Johnson employs—"Man," "Garden," "World," "Heaven," "Hell," and "command"—stays not only biblical but Miltonic. In fact, Johnson's selection of Milton's words suggests how much language referred to as biblical might be more rightly called Miltonic. Showing more generosity than anxiety, the erasures do not follow a Bloomian model of influence in which "strong poets" "wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death"

1. See, for instance, Eric Selinger, "I Composed the Holes': Reading Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os*," *Contemporary Literature*, 33:1 (Spring, 1992), 46-73; hereafter cited in the text as ICH.

and where “the more generosity,” “the poorer the poets involved.”¹ Instead, Johnson shows how durable *Paradise Lost* remains.

1971’s other landmark publication suggested the conditions that would allow erasure poetry to develop from a curiosity to a mainstream technique. For decades, the extent of Pound’s editing of “The Waste Land” had been rumored but not precisely known. In 1946, Eliot recalled that Pound “reduced” the initial draft “to about half its size.”² In 1959 Pound told Kenner, “I advised him [Eliot] on what to leave out.”³ Neither Eliot nor Pound, though, could give a fuller account. The publication of “The Waste Land” manuscript gained attention for a number of reasons; it documented the depth of Pound’s participation in creating the most celebrated poem of the twentieth century and encouraged the recognition of poetry composition as a collaborative act. More to the concerns of this study, Pound’s brilliant slashing and cuttings showed excision to be central to the modern art of poetry.

Published a half-century after “The Waste Land,” the manuscript prominently confirmed an idea that already enjoyed wide circulation; it retroactively demonstrated the importance of an already valued skill. “The best kind of revision is almost always to cut out,”⁴ observed Donald Justice, recalling the lessons that he taught generations of creative-writing students at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and the University of Florida’s M.F.A. program. This idea served as a truism of the poetry workshop, as William Stafford observed, “Usually when somebody says ‘revise’ they think that means ‘cutting down’ or something like that.”⁵ Poets who agreed on little else offered their own versions of this idea, declaring “Cutting is an important part of revision” and “Most writing is cutting.”⁶

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1. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 5 and 30.
 2. T.S. Eliot, “Ezra Pound,” *The New England Weekly*, October 31, 1946, 28.
 3. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: Obolensky 1959), 146; see also T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, Valerie Eliot, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1971.
 4. Justice also refers “to my principle that the best form of revision is cutting” in *The Poetry of Donald Justice*, Dana Gioia and William Logan, eds. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 188, 189.
 5. William Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer’s Vocation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), 118.
 6. Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (New York: Harcourt, 1994), 111 and David Lerner, *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*, Alan Kaufman and S.A. Griffin, eds. (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1999), 468. Writing guides also offer assignments based on this principle: for instance, “cut out every other sentence, or every fourth word, or every second noun.” See Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet’s Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1997), 137. Hannah Sullivan argues that “the association of revision and literary value is the legacy of high modernism and the print culture that nourished it.” See Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.

In his introductory note, Johnson names two sources of inspiration for *Radi os*, each distanced from it by genre or time: Lucas Foss's *Baroque Variations* and William Blake's *Milton*. Johnson quotes Foss's description of "Variation I" to identify a shared artistic aim, "The inaudible moments leave holes in Handel's music. (I composed the holes)." Johnson also describes Blake's printing and composition techniques as a model, "To etch is 'to cut away.'" (R ix). The one time Johnson refers to a poetic contemporary, thanking Robert Duncan for "his encouragement through my solitary quest," (R ix) the expression of gratitude only emphasizes Johnson's isolation, as he ventures forth on a "solitary quest." Johnson's explanation of his erasure composition, though, closely resembles many contemporary poets' accounts of their writing process. In some cases, the language mimics each other. At a 1971 poetry festival discussion, after fellow panelist William Stafford described composition as "sifting," William Matthews outlined his "idea of revising" as "going back and putting holes in it—places for the light to come through, I guess. So most of the revision I do is by cutting."¹

The next few decades clarified the usefulness of Johnson's achievement. As late as nineteen-ninety-two, the second scholarly essay devoted to *Radi os* debated with the first whether the poems was "written by gimmick,"² but the question of erasure's eccentricity already had given way to an appreciation of its attractiveness. Certain factors encouraged this development. *Radi os* and, by extension, erasure built on a familiar logic. Both extended a commonplace notion of revision onto the entire composition process. Contemporary poetry's increasing emphasis on an elliptical, self-interrogating poetics also recommended erasure rooted in linguistic play and fragmentation. Even more strikingly, the technique also attracted poets beyond any one particular aesthetic orientation, including poets less inclined to celebrate fragmentation and formal novelty.

In the nineteen-nineties, erasure gave poets a technique to address the era's most pressing subject: the physical and emotional devastation that HIV/AIDS wrought. Of course not all poets who explored this subject wrote erasure poems. Written at the end of his life, Johnson's "Blocks to be Arranged in a Pyramid, In Memoriam, AIDS," comprised of sixty-six quatrains organized in the shape of the pyramid, a structure that bestows an architectural solidity onto the mournful,

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1. Robert Bly, William Stafford, William Matthews, Stephen Mooney, Ben Thomas, and David Verble, "Discussions During the Spring Poetry Festival, Martin, April 16-17, 1971," *The Tennessee Poetry Journal*, Spring, 1971, 4:3, 30.
 2. As Selinger notes, the sole essay devoted to Johnson's work indexed in the Modern Language Association bibliography at the time of Selinger's writing, "I Composed the Holes': Reading Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os*," was William Harmon's "The Poetry of a Journal at the End of an Arbor in a Watch." *Parnassus* 9.1 (1981): 217-32. Selinger argues against the idea that *Radi os* was "written by gimmick," (ICH 47) which is Selinger's paraphrase of Harmon's view. After quoting the opening of *Radi os*, Harmon rather reservedly wrote, "I suppose it took originality to come with the gimmick in the first place" (225).

shifting elegy. Other early AIDS elegists likewise turned to sturdy verse forms, most notably, the rime royal Sonia Sanchez employs in *Does Your House Have Lions?* and the various metrical and occasionally rhyming forms Thom Gunn uses in *The Man with Night Sweats*. Such forms signaled a remove, whether in time or emotion, from the painful physical decline the poems witness. “Your lungs collapsed, and the machine, unstrained, / Did all your breathing now. Nothing remained,”¹ Gunn observed in expertly organized couplets.

Erasure gave other AIDS elegists the means to explore the contrary impulse, to see how the fragmentation that erasure often inspires might help them to reformulate the relation of mourning and poetic form. If, as Jahan Ramazani maintains, “the elegy had always maintained a balance between impersonality” and “personal grief,”² erasure allowed AIDS elegists to address the contemporary moment’s particular manifestation of the long-standing need. It gave them a strategy to rebalance these two imperatives.

The opening stanza Joan Retallack’s “A I D / I / S A P P E A R A N C E” consists of seven numbered lines, which the following six stanzas systematically erase:

1. in contrast with the demand of continuity in the customary description
2. of nature the indivisibility of the quantum of action requires an essential
3. element of discontinuity especially apparent through the discussion of the
4. nature of light she said it’s so odd to be dying and laughed still it’s early
5. late the beauty of nature as the moon waxes turns to terror when it wanes
6. or during eclipse or when changing seasons change making certain things
7. disappear and there is no place to stand on and strangely we’re glad³

Like nearly all contemporary erasure poets, Retallack follows Johnson’s model more than Zukofsky’s; she explains her methods and names her source texts. An author’s note indicates that the first three lines and the start of the fourth quote a passage from Niels Bohr’s *Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature*:

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1. Thom Gunn, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 467.—Asked about the elegy for her brother, *Does Your House Have Lions?*, an elegy for brother, Sanchez observed, “Every time I am writing about something painful, I always retreat in some strange way to formal work,” noting, “I’m connecting to a prior time. I think that’s the only reason I’m doing that piece on my brother in rime royal.” See Sonia Sanchez, *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, Joyce A. Joyce, ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 32, 44, Ronald Jonson, *Blocks to Be Arranged in a Pyramid: In Memoriam, AIDS*. Broadside. Chicago: LVNG, 1996 and Sonia Sanchez, *Does Your House Have Lions?* (Boston: Beacon, 1997).
 2. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 46.
 3. Joan Retallack, *How to Do Things with Words* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1998), 55; hereafter cited in the text as *HDTWW*.

Thus, in contrast with the demand of continuity which characterizes the customary description of nature, the indivisibility of the quantum of action requires an essential element of discontinuity in the description of atomic phenomena. The difficulty of combining the new knowledge with our ordinary scheme of physical ideas became especially apparent through the discussion of the nature of light [...].¹

Consistent with longstanding Modernist practice, Retallack analogizes between scientific and poetic theory. In this respect, Bohr's science justifies her poetry. The Nobel Laureate insists on the need for "an essential / element of discontinuity" in description, whether of "atomic phenomena" (as his original sentence ends) or in the "nature of light" (as Retallack amends it with a phrase taken from Rohr's next sentence).

Quoted more than a half-century after its initial publication in nineteen-twenty-nine, Rohr's insight, though, arrives rather late for that purpose. It follows decades in which a commitment to discontinuity served as a defining characteristic of avant-garde poetics. More immediately, many of Retallack's contemporaries already had busily updated previous breaks from "customary" modes of representation with their own manifestos and poems, explorations of supposed alternatives such as parataxis, disjunction, rupture, "a rejection of closure" and "the new sentence" as Lyn Hejinian and Ron Silliman respectively advocated a decade and a half-decade before Retallack wrote "A I D / I / S A P P E A R A N C E." The second part of the stanza clarifies the quotation's need. To write of "the beauty of nature as the moon waxes turns to terror when it wanes" is to tread dangerously close to what Charles Altieri called "the scenic mode," "highly crafted moments of scenic empathy" and which others associated with the poetic avant-garde derided in even more biting terms, whether as a "coercive, epiphanic mode," as Hejinian called it, or as "the 'the 'I-as-sensitive-register,' [...]. the Romantic faith in the power of ordinary, everyday experience to yield 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears,'" as Marjorie Perloff scathingly wrote.²

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1. Niels Bohr, *Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature: Four Essays*, Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 107.
 2. Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 41, which reprints Hejinian's 1983 talk, "The Rejection of Closure," Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987), Charles Altieri, "Sensibility, Rhetoric, and Will: Some Tensions in Contemporary Poetry," *Contemporary Literature*, 23: 4 (Autumn, 1982), 452, 454, and Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 63. More recently, Srikanth Reddy notes an underling irony: that Hejinian's "polemical call may seem somewhat strained (Hejinian's call to abolish closure is, after all, every bit as coercive as the siren call of an epiphanic mode." See Srikanth Reddy, *Changing Subjects: Digressions in Modern American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 164.

Retallack shares these well-known concerns, all published and widely discussed before she wrote her poem. She too scorns what she later calls “the lyric poem that serves up the autopiloted mini-epiphany at its conclusion.”¹ At the same time, her poem is drawn to elements of the discredited poetics. The second half of the poem depicts “ordinary, everyday experience,” “moments of scenic empathy,” and does so through the use of traditional poetic tropes and images. Following longstanding lyric convention, the change of seasons and phases of the moon represent the workings of human mortality, as in the “terror” of the waning moon and “changing seasons change making certain things / disappear.” Even more strikingly, these images build to an epiphany, “strangely we’re glad.” Rohr’s opening quotation allows the poem to sample these strategies while simultaneously distinguishing itself from “customary description.” The first half of the poem permits the second. Rohr’s words defend Retallack from a charge; they allow her to incorporate a poetics she rejects.

Erasure achieves a similar effect. The subsequent stanzas remove the letters “A,” “I,” “D,” and “S” then their surrounding letters until the final stanza consists only of that last letter removed followed by seven blank numbered lines:

Y

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
7. (HDTWW 57)

“I wanted,” Retallack explains, “a form that would replicate—in the reading experience—both the proximal form of contagion and the literal disappearance of the person as this disease moved him toward death.”² To embody the physical deterioration, her erasures translate “contagion” and “disappearance” into linguistic terms. They de-familiarize the poem’s language, making it strange, to the extent that is hard to know how to articulate many of the resulting lines: “6. o n l pow n n no n n mn n n / 7. pp n no pl o no n nly w l.” (HDTWW 57) In this respect, the poem pursues what Retallack calls “a Cagean experimental strategy, which from the fifties on always began with this question: What can we discover when we stop trying to describe nature through our emotions?”³ In another

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1. *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 214.
 2. *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*, Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes, Editors. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 405.
 3. Joan Retallack, “What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?”, *Jacket* 32 (April 2007).

sense, though, Retallack use of form compellingly violates her justifications. Retallack does “describe nature through” “emotions.” She crafts a mournful, at times keening poem that ends with in near-silence, in a stark numerical representation of loss. The impersonality of the form intensifies the anguish. It deepens and validates the expression of personal grief.

The poem, though, that best suggests erasure’s wider currency resists the technique’s most common associations. James Merrill came to poetic erasure through Sapphic stanzas, which he first tried as he neared the last decade of his writing career.¹ Within a few years, Merrill composed several AIDS elegies in Sapphic stanzas, including two for his close friend, the literary critic David Kalstone, “Investiture at Cecconi’s” and “Farewell Performance.” Published in *The New Yorker* a month before Merrill received his formal diagnosis of AIDS Related Complex,² “Losing the Marbles” explores the meanings that the punning title introduces: “Losing the Marbles,” in the sense of Greece’s loss of the Elgin Marbles and, most hauntingly, the speaker’s fear that he is losing his memory, due not only to his age but also the possibility of HIV/AIDS related dementia. The poem explicitly mentions old age’s diminishing effects (“These latter years [...] / Will see the mind eroded featureless”); its references to an unnamed “virus” and “fleshless ribs” discreetly suggest the more particular fear.³

Composed in seven sections, the poem employs a number of forms, including heroic couplets and cross-rhyming quatrains. Appearing in the third section, the erasure takes the form of a poem ruined by rain:

body, favorite
 gleaned, at the
 vital
 frenzy— (*IR* 86)

Merrill draws more from the model of classical fragments than of Modernist ones. A surprisingly sympathetic reader of Kenner’s *The Pound Era*,⁴ though, he

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1. Another precursor is Merrill’s novel, *The (Diblos) Notebook* (New York: Athenaeum, 1965), which employs the related techniques of textual crossing-out and excision. In an afterward to its nineteen-ninety-four reissue, Merrill discusses the novel in terms that also seem relevant to his use of erasure in “Losing the Marbles”: “I hadn’t, of course, set out to be ‘experimental’— heaven forbid! Surely there were different kinds of readability, texts whose very fragmentation quickened the pulse.” See James Merrill, *The (Diblos) Notebook* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), 149.
 2. I take the dates of Merrill’s diagnosis from Langdon Hammer, *James Merrill: Life and Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 695–698; hereafter cited in the text as *JM*.
 3. James Merrill, *The Inner Room* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 84 and 85; hereafter cited in the text as *IR*.
 4. Merrill appreciatively quotes and paraphrases *The Pound Era* twice in his prose, including praising Kenner to describing how “a good reader” can understand a poet’s formal explorations. Kenner, Merrill observed, “beautifully evoked the excitement” of how “a reality is cre-

reverses the test Kenner gives to the fragments Kenner created from Pound and Moore. Merrill wishes to return the fragments to their original state, not see if they remain “cherishable” in their broken form. Faced with what he calls “the wrong words,” he seeks to repair the damage, “Feverishly restoring the papyrus” (*IR* 85).

By placing the erasure two sections before the source text, Merrill doubly tests himself. “Losing the Marbles” repeatedly expresses the fear that the poet has lost not only his memory but also his creative powers: “Long work of knowing and hard play of wit / Take their toll like any virus” (*IR* 83). The task of reconstructing an erased text requires the two faculties, the poet’s memory and his creativity. In this respect, the technical poetic challenge doubles as a self-administered cognitive exam.

The erasure also invites its readers to imagine the lost lines. When the fifth section reveals the restored poem to be written in Sapphic stanzas—a “tricky” form, Merrill observed (*CP* 11)¹—the expertly surmounted difficulty distinguishes Merrill’s poem from the presumably less inventive versions that his readers construct. The old triumphs over the new, the restored poem asserts, contrasting cagey “old poets” possessing “peasant shrewdness” who “knew to make / wanderings into / homecomings of a sort” with “youthful poets,” overwhelmed into inarticulateness:

The body, favorite trope of our youthful poets [...] .
With it, they gleaned, as at the sibyl’s tripod,
Insight too prompt and vital for words.
Her sleepless frenzy— (*IR* 89)

While “youthful poets” are driven into a “sleepless frenzy,” the mature poet coolly understands the body and its limits. Instead of emphasizing intensity, the restored passage returns to the literary qualities characteristic of Merrill’s verse: namely, a leisurely formal dexterity matched with a knowingly sophisticated tone.

Introducing “Losing the Marbles” at a reading, Merrill called the third section “deliberately incoherent, representing a text half effaced by rain” (*CP* 18), a description that betrays a certain unease. The possibility that his erasures might be misread as unintentionally “incoherent” troubles Merrill, especially since he assigns such importance to formal control to the extent that it represents artistic and physical good health. The qualities frequently claimed for fragmentation and

ated [...] by the most formal means.” See James Merrill, *Collected Prose*, J.D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser, eds. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 12, 13, and 227; hereafter cited in the text as *CP*. Hammer observes that Merrill “discovered through it [*The Pound Era*] for the first time an admiration for the author of *The Cantos*” (*JM* 504).

1. James Merrill, *Collected Prose*, J.D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser, eds. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 11; hereafter cited in the text as *CP*.

the arguments made for it only add to Merrill's misgivings. Whereas Retallack justifies her erasures on the basis of a historical demand, Merrill resists the notion that a certain understanding of modernity should determine his formal choices. "No doubt the real question must be put in some such terms as these," Merrill observed, "[D]oesn't our world, with all its terrifying fragmentations and new frontiers, call for equivalent formal breakthroughs?" To answer his question, Merrill noted his own predilection:

The degree to which one yields to such demands is finally, I think, a matter of temperament and cannot be forced [...]. It remained a fairly old-fashioned context—the need for a rhyme or an amphibrach—that I found most conducive to surprise. It was always “educational” to try a new form. (CP 11)

Behind Merrill's use of erasure lurks the contrarian desire not to give in to others' claims, to “yield to such demands.” Yet he also recognizes that a “new form”—that is, a form new to the poet—extends a different set of opportunities, conditions potentially conducive to surprise. Merrill encloses his erasures in sections that show impressive metrical sophistication. He mends the staged damage done to his words by restoring them to technically challenging Sapphic stanzas. Because Merrill approaches erasure cautiously, his reservations clarify the benefits the technique offers. Late in his career, Merrill continued his artistic education, turning to a technique that encourages fragmentation and concision, qualities that his poetry typically avoids. Erasure taught Merrill how to sound unlike himself.

Once erasure developed into a recognizable feature of contemporary poetry, its familiarity prompted the exploration of more focused effects. Several of the era's most celebrated poets recognized that erasure need not organize an entire poem or extended passages. Instead, they localized erasure, using it as an occasional gesture within a line. Starting in her nineteen-eighty-seven collection, *The End of Beauty*, Jorie Graham increasingly incorporated blank spaces, writing “corridors, windows, a meadow, the _____,” and “Mud, ash, _____, _____.”¹ As in these examples, it is impossible to determine with confidence the omitted words that should fill Graham's blank spaces. As such they might be said to represent the privacy implicit in her understanding of the contemporary lyric.² In an elegy for her mother, Anne Carson turns to a different form of erasure to achieve a dramatically different effect. Carson reproduces a crossed-section

1. Jorie Graham, *The End of Beauty* (New York: Ecco: 1987), 64 and 25.

2. See Thomas J. Otten, “Jorie Graham's _____s,” *PMLA*, 118: 2 (March, 2003), 240 and Catherine Karaguezian, “No Image There and the Gaze Remains”: *The Visual in the Work of Jorie Graham* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 106.

of Virginia Woolf's diary, in order find comfort amidst her mourning. "Crossouts sustain me now,"¹ she observes.

While these examples suggest erasure's assimilation into contemporary poetry, the technique more commonly involves the larger reworking of non-literary source texts. While some erasure poets construct what David Dodd Lee calls "*poems* from *poems*,"² many more draw from harsher, non-literary materials. For better or worse, the contemporary moment produces a staggering number of these potential source texts, which technology allows poets to access and revise.

Several poems in Philip Metres's collection, *Sand Opera*, erase passages from the Standard Operating Procedure manual for Camp Echo at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp, which Metres obtained via Wikileaks. Borrowing the technique from military censors, Metres redacts the unredacted source text, covering the document's words with thick black bars. "Document Exploitation (Standard Operating Procedures)" reworks a section that sets guidelines for linguists to follow when translating prisoners' letters. "further clarify,"³ the poem advises, before a series of black bars, five in six lines, thwart that aspiration. Tellingly, Metres redacts material beyond the source text. "Remember our job is to translate letters, not analyze them," the manual states.⁴ Metres quotes the last four words, "translate letters, not analyze them," placing a black bar between "not" and "analyze" as if a word had been stricken there. Blacking out words that do not exist, he is more thorough than any censor, employing the borrowed black bars as a literary technique, a stylization of suppression.

This kind of erasure poetry raises a number of technical, moral, and aesthetic concerns. To craft seemingly unpromising source texts into poetry is to show the art form's great reach and its need for limitation. Erasure does not quote blocks of the source text but transforms great masses of borrowed words into poetry through a process of exclusion, the purposeful culling of words and phrases. Again and again, erasure shows that the imposition of a limitation defines the art of poetry; it distinguishes poems from their non-poetic source texts. A process of exclusion redefines the borrowed words as poetry, not, say, a military or legal document. At the same time, poets erase these kinds of source texts because of—not despite—their histories. To make art out language that appalls them, these erasure poets face an additional challenge: the need to offer a response beyond simple moral outrage or avoidance.

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1. Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 166.
 2. David Dodd Lee, *Sky Booths in the Breath Somewhere, The Ashbery Erasure Poems* (Buffalo, NY: BlazeVox, 2010), 13.
 3. Philip Metres, *Sand Opera* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2015), unnumbered title page, 17, and 101.
 4. "Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, March 28, 2003, 15.3.

Joshua Bennett uses erasure sparingly in his debut collection, *Sobbing School*. It is one of a number of techniques he employs to explore his central artistic concern as a print-based poet and spoken word artist: how to express the experience of a young African-American man living at a time when, as Bennett puts it, “the extra-judicial killings of black folks in the US context went mainstream.”¹ “Forgive me,” he pleads, “everything I write these days has a bullet and a badge in it.”² The one erasure poem in *Sobbing School*, “Home Force, Presumption of Death” examines a legal justification for a related kind of the violence: the controversial Florida law commonly known as “Stand Your Ground,” which expanded the legal right of homeowners to defend themselves in the face of perceived threats. Passed and expanded amidst several widely noticed incidents of racial violence, the bill faced numerous criticisms, including the fear that it would aggravate the discrimination already present in the American legal system.³ The statute, then, represents a particularly vivid example of a broader issue: the legal and social framework that encourages and maintains racial violence.

Composed in staggered couplets, the poem keeps some of the bill’s legal terminology and syntax, whether to borrow phrases and constructions or, more commonly, to reverse their meaning:

person is presumed to have a self or body.
 person gains unlawful dwelling, or occupies

against will. personhood does not apply
 if the son against whom forced is used

has no lawful owner or title to protect.
 violence against the child is wise.

official duties: the officer identifies
 any applicable reason. so tempting

to attack, retreat, stand and meet
 force with dead. it is necessary

to prevent the body, harm
 him, sing *get over it*.⁴

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1. Joshua Bennett, Introduction to performance of “Still Life With Black Death,” Striver’s Row, October 5, 2015.
 2. Joshua Bennett, “In Case of Emergency: Letter To My Nephew,” Striver’s Row, October 5, 2015.
 3. See, for instance, Nicole Ackerman, Melody S. Goodman, Keon Gilbert, Cassandra Arrovo-Johnson, and Marcello Pagano, “Race, Law, and Health: Examination of ‘Stand Your Ground’ and Defendant Convictions in Florida,” *Social Science and Medicine* 142 (October 2015), 194-201.
 4. Joshua Bennett, *The Sobbing School* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 54; hereafter cited in the text as SS.

Bennett's erasures critique their source text. Most obviously, they expose its repressive logic, sometimes boldly, as in the caustic declarations, "violence against the child is wise" and "the officer identifies / any applicable reason." More subtly they develop the vocabulary claimed from it. The statute mentions "person" thirteen times in the section Bennett erases but never "personhood," a key concept to Bennett, both the subject of his doctoral dissertation and the question his poetry often explores, "How do human beings once considered property imagine a more capacious, liberating vision of personhood?"¹ To construct "personhood" from the statute's hostile language is to propose a social strategy articulated in poetic terms. Deftly Bennett cobbles letters from four words that range from nearly the beginning to the end of his source text, modeling the careful hard work needed to construct and maintain an expansive sense of one's humanity in the face of violent opposition.

The poem's final phrase, "sing *get over it*," though, conspicuously departs from this pattern. It introduces a slangy syntax and diction. The line might be read in two main ways. In one sense, it presents another justification of violence. "[G]et over it," the perpetrator demands, meaning those who object should set aside their complaints. Continuing an ugly racial history, they should perform their compliance and accept another "harm to the body."

The syntactically ambiguous line, though, never specifies who is singing, whether the perpetrator, victim, or witness. Exploiting this fact, the line also represents a very different kind artistic aspiration. Song transforms lived experience; sung, borrowed words gain new meanings and authority. "I wanted to wrest sovereignty from the statute itself," Bennett explains, "I wanted to put words in the law's mouth."² "*Home Force, Presumption of Death*" also puts the law's words in the poet's mouth. He not only refuses to "get over it," he also turns a statute into a poem, a cause of suffering into a defiant expression of personhood and possibility. As a spoken word artist and a printed-based poet, Bennett intimately knows the potential of articulation to change what is said, to voice alternatives. "Sing it," Bennett repeats in a spoken word poem, "We sing what we cannot say anywhere else."³ "*Home Force, Presumption of Death*" both rejects and elevates its source text. To sing a selection of the statute's words is to perform a desperate, ennobling act of personhood. In short, "*Home Force, Presumption of Death*" pursues the artistic imperative that the next poem in the collection names, "To be

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1. Joshua Bennett, "Author's Statement, National Endowment for the Arts," Writers' Corner, 2017 Poetry.
 2. "'The Unrestrained Fleet of Bone': An Interview with Joshua B. Bennett," *The Collagist*, July 2, 2015.
 3. Joshua Bennett, "Say It, Sing It If The Spirit Leads (After Vievee Francis)," *Anthology Show*, Stage 48, New York, August 2, 2013.

sure, our moment demands a song [...] this poem is interested in enacting the world it yearns for” (SS 55).

Bennett’s erasures, then, wed social critique and aspiration; they revise a harsh source text to introduce a more generous vision of human relations. The poetic technique models a revisionist model of social change as rebarbative raw materials are painstakingly cut and reconfigured, not trashed. The history that the words bear adds to their force. Bennett wants the reader to recognize this history, the frustrating impediments it maintains to what he calls “the world” the poem “yearns for.” By reworking a malicious source text into poetry, the erasures add a hopeful formal gesture. They testify to the potential of creative selection to coax a new reality from the old.

Poetics of the Séance: Theorizing the Spectopoetics of Erasurist Poetry

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I. Introduction: Writing With One Hand, ~~Erasing With the Other~~

In *Derrida* (2002), Jacques Derrida states in reference to deconstruction and the nature of language it interrogates, “I write with one hand and erase with the other” (Dick & Ziering). When thought of through the forms of found poetry/art (un)produced by erasure, then an erasurist piece can be described as a ghost of itself. Though the theorization of ghosts occurs extensively throughout Derrida’s development of hauntology in *Specters of Marx* (1994), latent within the figure of the ghost are not only the re-de-constructive praxes and phenomena of signification/language, archaeology, holography, bricolage, symptom, dream, memory, echo, but also séance. While the above-mentioned praxes occur in varying disciplines, they each overlap over the idea that a source text always-already contains within it its own erasure. While typically erasure is associated with the paradoxical relationship between obfuscation and revelation, as in the confluence of extraction and eradication of meaning in redacted documents, it is also inextricable from certain poetic praxes. A notable example can be found in Jonathan Safran Foer’s attempt to represent the unrepresentable loss of the Holocaust in *Tree of Codes* (2010).

There are numerous theoretical features of erasurist poetry and poetics that make a strict definition of its forms and/or techniques difficult. However, the mechanics of erasure are ostensibly simple: the erasurist selects a source text, s/he then selects words/series or groupings of words and/or punctuation native to the source, and marks them in some way to distinguish them from the rest of the hidden or veiled aspects of the source text. Both treating and creating the binary between source and erasure can be done in many ways. Each results in a rearrangement of the source and its meanings by marking as with a redaction, whereby the source is made invisible by being blacked out; extraction, whereby

the erasurist extracts an aspect(s) of the source completely from the source as in cutting out parts of a page with scissors; or strikethrough whereby the excluded parts of the source remain visible, to varying degrees of clarity, despite being partially obscured by the strikethrough(s) themselves. In each instance, the relationship between source and erasure is one in which each co-engenders the other: the erasure is a mark that simultaneously obfuscates and reveals its source. In this way, erasure is paradoxically destructive creativity, reconstructive deconstruction, regenerative decay, obfuscatory revelation, and/or making disappear. Here, the source and erasure act symbolically in relation to one another in the same way a body does its ghost. In this sense, erasurist poetics are concerned with leaving behind an echo or trace of a source whereby the trace that in the erasure of the source is simultaneously a spectre of the source as well as a new source/second source in itself, an afterlife of the source or the source deferred. There are, however, other pragmatic and theoretical considerations evoked by erasurist work and praxes such as the exorbitancy of the source, that is the limits of the amount of erasure that can be created from a specific source. Furthermore, aesthetic decisions also afford avenues for more complex (re)meanings, such as the use of colour existing within the source or superimposed onto it, and also the nature of the space—be it an image or blank space—upon which the erased source becomes a new or second source.

Referring to specific examples that emphasize the polyvalent effects of erasure taken from American erasurist poet Susan Howe, this essay will attempt to develop a spectopoetics by theorizing erasure as both form and praxes against key concepts in Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1967) and *Spectres of Marx* (1994). What makes the author's work particularly effective in the analysis I propose is the fact that deconstruction is particularly concerned with readings of texts, which could be termed erasures, with an ear to run counter to the source text's structural unity or intended sense. Deconstruction's attempts to expose the structuring and (de)structuring effects at work in the fundamental tension between presence and absence, creation and destruction, Meaning and meaning(s) makes it particularly well suited starting point in the development of spectopoetics in erasurist praxes. This essay aims to offer a close theoretical reading of the paradoxical deconstructive (re)constructive effects of erasure.

II. *Tracing the Trace: A Brief History of Erasurist Poetry*

To call erasurist poetry a form of writing is somewhat misleading. Not unlike Jacques Derrida's deconstructive techniques, erasurist poetry can be aptly described as a strategy. I make these prefatory remarks as a way of drawing attention to the fundamental paradoxes evinced by erasurist poetry. The paradox I am referring to inheres in the fact that 'writing' implies a generative act, whereby the written or typed word, and groups thereof in sentences and/or stanzas, form sign-

chains that produce meaning. In contrast, the erasurist strategy and its various techniques can be accurately described as un-writing. In the last instance, erasure results in the presence of a source page, itself a representation of a collection of sign-chains, being un-made, either by strikethrough, redaction or the reterritorialization of the source sign-chains through bricolage in order to (un)produce meaning(s) from an existing text or texts. The technique appears to be essentially negative in that it requires un-production in order to be productive. However, we can define the techniques of erasurist strategy as a form of found poetry/art. Artifacts of this kind are paradoxically created by erasing, redacting, or bricolaging signs, in poetry typically words, from an existing text of prose or verse. The presentation of the residue of erasure, namely the erasure itself, which can be thought of as a trace of the source, is subsequently presented as a poem. The erasure can be presented *in situ*, or re-arranged into poetic stanzas replete with line breaks, or superimposed upon yet another reterritorialized backdrop, which, depending on whether it has been manipulated or not, is tantamount to being an erasure upon another erasure. Erasure can also be construed as a form innately hostile toward the positivist conception of the sovereignty of authorship precisely because it troubles the trace of authorship in erasing the author if the text is taken to represent the presence and/or authority of the author. The paradoxical nature of erasure raises further complexes concerning the (dis)authorial intent of the erasurist whereby the strategy of erasure can be deployed in numerous ways against its source. For example, the erasurist's redactive decisions may be intended to subvert, invert, laud or efface entirely the intent and/or meaning of the source. This process may be ostensibly random or intuitive, or specifically deliberate, both in terms of the source used and its (un)created erasure(s). In this way, knowing the source and subsequently comparing it with its erasure provides the reader insight into the choices behind the erasurist's redactions, strikethroughs or bricolages. In recent times, the strategy of erasure has availed itself of modern techniques. Sites like *erasures.wavepoetry.com* represent the increased technological constituent in erasurist praxis. On the site, a user may browse through an extensive catalogue of source texts, ranging in publication date and subject matter. After selecting a text, the user is then sent a page from said text, subsequently clicking on any word or punctuation mark thereby making it disappear. Re-clicking the same word or punctuation mark will make it reappear. Through click erasure, a new text, erasure, and/or poem emerges. The results may be archived, printed, or emailed. Like a growing necropolis, both the archive of sources and erasures continues to expand.

There are also more directly imagistic erasurist technological strategies. For example, after an erasurist has created an erasure from a source, she may then subsequently find another source, an image, upon which the textual erasure is superimposed. The erasurist may use programs like Photoshop to (un)create a merger of two erasures, textual and imagistic, whereby the latter is overlaid on the

former and, using the ‘erase tool’, the text ‘behind’ the image is brought forward, not unlike conjuring a ghost. This technique, like with purely textual erasures, may or may not intentionally leave some of the original text and/or image(s) to show through as a way of highlighting the (un)creative decisions the erasurist has made.

In his essay “A Brief History of Erasure Poetics” (2009), Travis Macdonald states that the origins of erasurist poetry refer back to 1968 with the first printed appearance of *The Tablets* (1999 complete), the epic poem of American poet Armand Schwerner. Schwerner’s work is primarily concerned with textual erosion, featuring an erasurist key which functions like a poetic Ouija board that denotes the indices of erasure. As Macdonald notes, “the ellipsis [...] represents untranslatable passages, plus signs (+++) indicate missing text, parenthetical question marks (?) provide variant readings, and brackets ([]) indicate sections supplied by the ‘scholar/translator’” (Macdonald 14). In Schwerner’s work, which is presented as a series of translations of the then recently discovered Sumero-Akkadian stone tablets, Schwerner, along with translator’s notes, paradoxically mark out missing passages and/or incomplete aspects of the source texts. Consider the following passage from *Tablet I*:

he is splayed on the... ... like a worn-out pig (god?) he is un- + + + + + + +
 + his is dis- + + + + + + + + + + + + he is + + + + + + + + + + -less his de- +
 + + + + + + + + + + he is impossible on the dry ground + + + + + + + + + +
 before he is non- + + + + + + + + he is pre- + + + + + + + + + +*
 *the isolated prefix remnants are curious. The tablet seems rubbed out with
 care. Is this segment an early attempt to unite form and meaning? graphic as
 well as substantial emptiness? (Schwerner 10)

One can note the tension between presence and absence highlighted by Schwerner’s erasive choices latent in the conflict between the positive words and phrases “he is” and the negative words, phrases, and prefixes such as “dis-”, “impossible”, “non-”, “un-” and “pre-” (Schwerner 10). These choices latently draw the reader’s attention to the fact that the strategy and operation of erasure (dis)engenders a paradoxical and peculiar type of (un)reading. The poem signifies through un-signifying, evokes meaning through meaninglessness, translates itself to the readers (un)comprehension through its untranslatability.

The same year, the American poet Jackson Mac Low published an erasurist collection titled *5 Biblical Poems* originally written between 1954 and 1955. Unlike Schwerner’s poetics, which are fundamentally generative in that they are the product of Schwerner’s erasure of his own words, Mac Low’s are primarily concerned with the erasure of pre-existing sources, primarily taken from the Bible. Consider the following extract from 5.2.3.6.5., *the 3rd biblical poem* (1986):

/____/ in men of /____/ we /____/ /____/ /____/ /____/ /____/
 /____/ unto /____/ /____/ man prayed /____/ /____/ /____/ /____/
 (Low 24)

A comparison between the two above extracts could lead one to conclude that both Schwerner and Low use erasurist strategies to compose holes, so to speak. However, that same comparison also reveals that while ostensibly similar, the technique or strategy of erasure can (un)produce starkly divergent results. “While the gaps on the page and the re-arrangement of lines and stanzas present a sort of appropriative erasure, adapted as they are from a carefully dissected host text,” notes Macdonald,

they function primarily as a sort of visual representation of the intended beat or measure. They represent a physical silence imposed upon the page by the poet. Whereas Schwerner’s notations tell us the fabricated *where* and *why* of what’s missing, Mac Low concerns himself primarily with *how* these absences are to function alongside their textual counterparts. The major distinction to be made between these two works, however, lies in their respectively generative and restrictive processes. While the end results undoubtedly bear a certain structural resemblance, they are nevertheless built on entirely different foundations. (Macdonald 21)

In 1960, Francois Le Lionnais, along with others including French mathematician Raymond Queneau, founded the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (‘Workshop of Potential Literature’), or *Oulipo*. The revisionist telos of the group was predicated on, first, the discovery of promotion of new and alternate literary forms to be used as tactics, methods, strategies, techniques, and tools with which to re-galvanize pre-existing texts. The primary methodology espoused by the Oulipo poets was, much in the same way that the erasurist strategy is, fundamentally negative. This typically manifested in the group’s concerted interest in the application of scientific and mathematical formulae as restrictions used to, paradoxically, extract new poetic expression.

The techniques of erasurist strategy in poetry were later formalized in the 1970s. Indeed, the formalization of erasurist praxis can be regarded as a manifestation of a Postmodernist rejection of the Romantic anxieties pervading preceding Modernist sensibilities. The ethos and telos of the European conception and understanding of erasurist praxis can be accurately summed up in the following extract from Le Lionnais’ *Second Manifesto* (1973): “Who has not felt, in reading a text—whatever its quality—the need to improve it through a little judicious retouching? No work is invulnerable to this. The whole of world literature ought to become the object of numerous and discerningly conceived prostheses” (Le Lionnais xxvi). The use of the term ‘prosthesis’ here is interesting as it evokes the phenomena of the phantom limb, the non-present limb that can still be felt as a present absence/absent presence in the remainder of the unaffected body. Simi-

larly, the Oulipan project is ultimately concerned with treating language/semiotics *in toto* as a phantom limb. Liberated from the pre-Postmodern obligatory inextricability between the linguistic sign and presence, between the subordination of the word and the letter to the pre-conceived sovereignty of meaning and authorial intent, language, cut off from these historical centres of meaning, is allowed to be 'felt', that is to signify, in different ways *precisely through* the process of being cut off/from/out of them. In this way, the Oulipo are an example of a marked praxiological shift away from such pre-existing boundaries, a shift which in its very praxis, erases the heretofore authority of the written word. In this sense, not only does "the proliferation of the written word ultimately engender its own dissolution", but also, "this subtle decay takes root, it simultaneously makes room for its own rejuvenation and renewal" (Macdonald 39). The labour of writing, which in erasurist methodology is, in fact erasing or un-writing, "erases the transcendental distinction between the origin" of the erasure and the erasure of the origin, each erasing the other while simultaneously producing the other (Derrida 267). However, the erasurist strategy is predicated on a fundamental admission, namely, the materiality and immanence of language. As Marcel Benabou notes in *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (2015), "One must first admit that language may be treated as an object in itself, considered in its materiality, and thus freed from its subservience to its signifiatory obligation" (Benabou 41). The implication here is that the inevitable outcome of the continued proliferation of the written word is the breakdown of the structural boundaries of context from within which superimposed dictatorial meaning (re)circulates. With the rupturing of the contextual obligations of superimposed meaning, "language must be increasingly considered in terms of its own basic objective materiality" (Macdonald 40). However, while language, thought of in its materiality may be ostensibly ~~liberated~~ from the un-playful stricture of context, it is still haunted by history, particularly, the differential genealogy of meaning.

The basic ideas and praxiological approaches of Oulipo spread to America during the early 1970s and have arguably influenced certain aspects of Language writing. Poets identified with this movement were bound by a shared "rejection of lyric sentiment and authorial imposition" by "repeatedly challenging and extending the boundaries of both page and composition in their respective attempts to harness, exploit and reveal the material nature of language itself" (Macdonald 41). Other key figures of contemporary erasurism include the British poet Tom Phillips and American poet Ronald Johnson. The former's erasure *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1970) was created through the alteration, treatment and/or erasure of W. H. Mallock's 1982 novel *A Human Document*, whose title is (un)produced through the partial erasure of the original title. Phillips's erasurist techniques include drawing, painting, and collaging on and over the pages of the source text, while simultaneously allowing some of the source text to show

through. The latter is, perhaps, the quintessential example of erasurist strategy in American literature. Johnson's book-length poem *Radi os* (1977) was created by redacting words from the first four books of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the title of which, like Phillips' work, is (un)produced from a redaction of the original title.

Recent examples of erasurist poetry include Jen Bervin's *Nets* (2004), which was created by spectralizing the Sonnets of William Shakespeare to produce 150 new poems or erasures. Similarly, and in direct response to Johnson, Michael Koshkin's *Parad e R ain* (2006) produces an erasurist epic from the source of Milton's *Paradise Regained*. The erasurist strategy brought to bear here produces a radical deviation in terms of tone between the erasure and its source. While Milton's tone in *Regained* is portentous and pregnant with the gravitas and holy dread of ecumenical eschatology, Koshkin deliberately subverts this by carefully and humorously drawing out playful innuendoes from the source, suggesting that, by way analogy, within the judge's sentence of death is also a joke. The work of Mary Ruefle can also be placed in the tradition established by Phillips. Ruefle's *Little White Shadows* (2006) treats its source, namely the decaying yellowed pages of an unspecified 19th Century volume, with corrective fluid to redact and therefore isolate selected words. The result is erasures, not unlike white-sheet ghosts, (un)emerging from the little white shadows of her (un)marking. More recent examples include Janet Holmes' *MS OF M Y KIN* (2009), created from the erasure of the poems of Emily Dickenson. Additionally, Travis Macdonald's *The O Mission Repo* (2008) is an interesting example of an erasurist work that selects as its source a non-fiction work, namely *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Through black-bar redaction, Macdonald treats each page of the original report to create a parallel universe, a ghost-world of pre-9/11 reality that both haunts and highlights the shifts and uncertainties of language in a post-9/11 world.

III. ~~A Counter Plot of Horrifying Drift Errancy~~: Susan Howe, *A Brief Case Study*

The work of Susan Howe is often concerned with the rupture and conflation of genres, sometimes in a single work, including essay, prose, fiction, and verse. Howe's application of erasurist strategies range from (re)placing/ (re)arranging her verse upside-down, redacted, stricken-through, or overlapped/bricolaged. In "Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and Counter-method in Susan Howe" (1995), Ming-Qian Ma states that Howe's poetry, written in "matted palimpsests," embodies a

"three-layered linguistic deposit, or a three-dimensional language experience: (1) the source text, often excerpted or duplicated in prose and other genred language, or indicated by a footnote; (2) Howe's text as an act of writing through the source text; and (3) what this writing-through gestures toward. Resembling

what Lyn Hejinian calls "field work," such a textual formation becomes "an activity." The dynamics of the interweaving of all three invites or, indeed, demands a simultaneous, tripartite reading. [...] [S]uch textual formation suggests what Howe calls "a field of free transgressive prediscovery" (*Birth-Mark* 147). The clashes between words and the collisions among lines demilitarize language by creating points of "capture breaking" which, in turn, become locales for "the chance meeting of words." (Ma 478; 484)

Similarly, in "Ghosting the Line: The Ethics of Haunting in Susan Howe's Poetry" (2012), Dan Beachy-Quick states that "Howe's poems present absence, and absent presence [...] confusing intimacy with surface, confounding surface with intimacy" (Beachy-Quick 11).

These themes are evident in the following selections from Howe's *A Bibliography of the King's Book or Eikon Basilike* (1989):

Tell you my author
 I knew his hand
 The book was his
 The cloathing *Hands*
 I am a seeker
 of water-marks
 in the Antiquity
 The Sovereign stile
 in another stile
 Left scattered in disguise

Fig. i

No further trace
 of the printer

IN | HIS | SOLITUDE | To The

Reader the work

Prayers, &c. belonging

to no one without

Reasons

Fig. ii

ENGELANDTS MEMORIAEL

Tragicum Theatrum Actorum

Similar (not identical)

unsigned portraits of

Laud Charles I Fairfax

Holland Hamilton Capel

Cromwell

Fig. iii

ENGELANDTS MEMORIAEL

Tragicum Theatrum Actorum

Similar (not identical)

unsigned portraits of

Laud Charles I Fairfax

Holland Hamilton Capel

Cromwell

Fig. iv

Must lie outside the house

Side of space I must cross

To write against the Ghost

Fig. v

Great Caesar's ghost

Through history

this is the counter-plot
 and turns our swords in
 The First Revolution
 The Foundation of hearsay
 Horrifying drift errancy
 A forme and nearby form

Fig. vi

A First didn't write it

 Anguish of the heart
 Smart of the cure

 Strip furlong field

 Feet on someone else's wheat

 Easy market access

 On going struggle
 abandoned lands

 Lost power of expression
 Last power of expression

 The Battle of Corioli

 Obsessive images of Coriolanus

 The Author and Finisher
 The Author or the Fact

 of Gold of Thorn of Glory

Fig. vii

It is clear from the above that Howe's erasurist techniques are consistently and explicitly concerned with themes of ghosts, (dis)appearance, and the paradoxical problem of (non)presence. In *Fig. i*, the ghost-speaker draws attention to the problem of writing against antiquity, whereby any and all writing is always-already referential to writing preceding it. Through erasure, Howe questions the

authority of the authorial voice of Antiquity, here preserved with a capital 'A'. In essence, the erasure is an attempt to not only discover "water marks" of other "stiles" within the work of the arche-stile of Antiquity, but simultaneously, the erasure can be seen as acting as a "scattered disguise" of its source (Howe 1989). This theme is taken up again in *Fig. iii*, whose bold 'title' immediately centralizes concepts of memory, identity, and imprinting. However, it is the third line that reads "similar (not identical)" that highlights the underlying nature of erasure being similar to but not identical to its source, in this instance doubly-deferred by the use of parentheses (Howe 1989). *Fig. ii* again takes up the erasurist concern with anteriority and interiority, diffusion and isolation. In essence, the erasure is a paradoxical trace of the disappearance of the printer, its source (Howe 1989). In its solitude, it simultaneously does and does not *belong* to its source. Ostensibly, *Fig. vi* refers to spectrality through the obvious reference to Caesar's ghost. However, since the act of erasing a text can (un)produce meanings seemingly entirely foreign to it, erasure also necessarily acts as a "counter-plot" to the intention, meaning, and/or stricture of the source (Howe 1989). Here, the ghost(s) of origin(s) "exist in the very space in which they cease to exist" (Beachy-Quick 15). Furthermore, the erasure, as being a "form nearby a form" of the source, acts as an ironic and paradoxical "Foundation of hearsay", a "horrifying drift errancy" that though fundamentally referential, refers to a referent that has been erased, leaving it adrift in the redacted spaces, like hearsay, present, yet imprecise (Howe 1989). *Fig. v*, while being the shortest selection included here, distills most accurately the paradoxes inherent to textual erasurism. In her choices, Howe must contravene the meaning and form of the source, must cross it and in so doing "lie outside" its structurality (Howe 1989). In order to produce something new, the erasurist must write against the "Ghost" of origination haunting the source (Howe 1989). Similarly, the third couplet also could be taken as a distillation of the relationship between the erasure and its source as *both* the "Lost power of expression" and the "Last power of expression" respectively in *Fig. vii* (Howe 1989). In view of the above examples, it stands to reason that Lynn Keller suggests in *Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the modernist Tradition* (1987) that Howe's entire oeuvre can be described as

a poetics of intervening absence" due to the fact that "her writing embodies absence in its elliptical and disjunctive character, and in its dramatic use of space on the page [...] Paradoxically, then—or oxymoronically—her poetry provides eloquent testament though it is filled with silences. It sings in subtle harmonies while it confronts the violence and the repressions of history. (Keller 2)

IV. ~~Speaking Spectre/Spectre Speaking~~: Towards a Spectopoetics of Erasure through Derrida.

I would now like to conclude by drawing together the poetic techniques of erasurist strategy and hauntology to offer clear theoretical grounds for subsequent close readings and poetics thereof. Beginning with the associative link between the seance and erasure, the fundamental point to note is that traditional seances are attempts to establish communication with spirits. The intermediary, a medium, typically relays messages between the living and the dead and vice versa. While the rest of the seancers are seated around a table in a dark or semi-dark room, he or she typically enters into a trance, a onto-existential state of physico-spiritual *permeability* which allows the spirits to speak through her or his body, conveying messages, warnings, premonitions, and advice to the attendees. Methods of relay here include psychography, morse, levitation, apportation of objects, or olfactory signs. Informal social seances would fall into this category, which are typically conducted outside any religious context, where the individuals, either typically by use of a planchette or ouija board, attempt to establish, explore, or rupture a perceived boundary between the immanent and the transcendent, the normal and paranormal. There are notable variations of this basic format. The religious seance, for example, as conducted by Espiritismoists, Spiritualists and Divine Metaphysicians, invokes *communication* with the undead personages of individuals sequestered to the world or realm of the spirit. This process of 'receiving messages' officiated by an ordained minister or talented contact medium is, ultimately, intended to demonstrate the *continuity* of life and the permeability of death. Seances may also occur on stage whereby a medium contacts spirits whilst observed by an audience. In contrast, leader-assisted seances are typically overseen by the authority of a central medium.

The key aspect to these praxes is the intrinsically *communicative* nature of the seance. It is a technique of communication, of speaking and being spoken to, of inter-locution between the living and the dead whose spirits are non-present presences and present non-presences. When applied to erasurist poetry, a question emerges: is erasure inherently communicative? It would seem that it is in fact the opposite; that the act of erasure is a process whereby the communication between the source (the spirit) and its erasure (the fragment, trace, or residue thereof) is cut off. By way of analogy, one cannot have a seance if there are no dead to summon with which to speak. As such, the erasurist needs, paradoxically, 'kill' the source to reveal its 'spirit'. Such a macabre insight is due to the fact that erasure is paradoxically communicative in that it communicates its content through redaction. It is helpful to think of the source as a type of voice and its erasure as an incomplete quote thereof. In this analogy, then, erasure itself is not unlike partially silencing the voice of the source. This also means that the source cannot quote itself in its erasure without omissions. If the voice were quoted

without omissions, if the source was simply copied or reproduced, the resulting product would not be an erasure. While the logic of erasure appears paradoxical, it is important to also think of how it acts upon or affects the reader psychologically and emotionally. One of the most remarkable things about the technique of erasure is that the psychological and emotional marks an erasure leaves on the reader are marks that are the paradoxical result of making absences or unmaking presences.

Etymologically, the term ‘erase’, taken from the Latin root which roughly translates to ‘to scrape away’, implicitly suggests an inviolably negative act. Ostensibly to erase is to scrape away, rub out, expunge, efface, obliterate, kill and so on. In “Absent Things as if They Are Present” (2009), Jeannie Vanasco counters with her understanding of the paradoxically (de)generative strategy of erasure: “why erase the works of other writers? The philosophical answer is that poets, as Wordsworth defines them, are ‘affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present.’ [...] to erase is to write, style is the consequence of a writer’s omissions, and the writer is always plural. To erase is to leave something behind” (Vanasco 2009). Vanasco conjures a distinctly Heideggerian approach to the problem of presence and absence in erasure stating

Heidegger practised erasure as a way to define nihilism (in an indefinite sort of way). In a 1956 letter to Ernst Jünger, Heidegger wrote the term *being*, then crossed it out: “Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since the word is necessary, it remains legible.” Here erasure, or what philosophers call *sous rature* (“under erasure”), illustrates the problematic existence of presence and the absence of meaning. Crossed out, *being* becomes unreliable and indispensable at once. (Vanasco 2009)

In this way, the ‘original’ is always-already partially present in its own erasure, and yet only *entirely* present in an always-already deferred *elsewhere*.

Derrida’s work/thought is particularly suited for any attempt and spectopoetical theorization. This is because his entire oeuvre is recursively concerned, or haunted by, the problem of presence and/or the essential absence of presence. This is particularly evident in Derrida’s deployment of deconstructive techniques to place the notion of a transcendental signified, be it God, the Word, voice, letter, Self, or State under erasure. As Buse and Scott note in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (1999),

ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present. However, the ghost cannot be properly said to belong to the past. [...] Does then the ‘historical’ person who is identified with the ghost properly belong to the present? Surely not, as the idea of a return from death fractures all traditional conceptions of temporality. The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical, at once they ‘return’ and make their apparitional debut. Derrida has been pleased to call this dual movement of return and inauguration a ‘hauntology’, a coinage

that suggests a spectrally deferred non-origin within grounding metaphysical terms such as history and identity (Buse and Scott 11).

Derrida coins the term in *Specters of Marx*, in which he attempts to analyze the question “what is a ghost?” (Derrida 10). In short, Derrida’s ideas regarding hauntology involve acknowledging the Other that haunts the self, whose spectral and brooding presence pluralizes the certainties of ontology. I am invoking the idea that hauntology describes the problem of presence and absence by gesturing to the specter’s paradoxical state of being and non-being. Inherent to this indeterminate state are further associations between the concept of the ghost and the dialectics of presence/absence, life/death, visibility/invisibility, and immanence/transcendence. In treating erasures as ghosts of sources and therefore products of a type of poetic seance, erasures, like ghosts, are neither fully present nor fully absent. Here, an erasure is understood as the ghost of its source and the source as a trace of itself in its own erasure. Earlier, I suggested that the erasurist could be thought of as a sort of murderer-medium. It would be more accurate to describe the erasurist as a ghost-maker and also the medium of the voice of the ghost of the source.

Ultimately, the spectopoetics of erasure I am trying to develop here refers to the problem of presence or the always-already absence that constitutes it. The technique and act of erasure is as much revelatory as it is seemingly destructive. It shifts things aside and lets other things emerge, undermines the authority of presences to summon the play of hidden or possible. Erasing aspects of a presence reveals affects that would be imperceptible should the source from which they are derived remain fully present. These affects are conditional on the bricolage, de(re)territorialization, and/or erasure of the source from which they emerge, but necessarily, as such, require the ‘end of the source’, the death of the source, non-presence in order to emerge: the source has to be then not be, be presently non-present in order for its erasure to both be and signify. In the last instance, therefore, a source needs a trace and a trace a source. Erasures are predicated on the power of what Derrida refers to as the ‘ghost’ effect whereby the erasure is the source at once set aside and beside itself; an apparition of itself.

Dispersed throughout Derrida’s oeuvre are traces of tools with which one may understand, describe and theorize erasurist strategies. For example, Derrida describes the general mode of presence/absence in *Writing and Difference* (1967) in a way that accurately describes the general mode of source/erasure. Both are

somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture. This state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to nature, is perhaps the general mode of the presence or absence of the thing itself (Derrida 4).

The relationship between the erasure and the source from which it is removed is, in every way, paradoxical. The erasure is the partial source that emerges from itself through its own repression. In this way, an erasure allows the source to empty itself while remaining present in a new form. I was about to augment that assessment of the erasure by referring to it as a partial print, a residue of the source. However, from a grammatical perspective, the source is itself always-already a fragment of the mutable and mutating source of the history of writing, language, and the sign. Here, the source from which the erasure emerges is always-already a part of an ostensibly inexhaustible exorbitancy of pages upon which are collected series of signs. The process of selection, be it arbitrary or considered, is what turns the source into a centre. It is this choice that simultaneously determines the nature, scope, and play of the ghosts the erasurist can conjure through the subsequent redaction of the source and the inherent, albeit paradoxical, violence of the creative technique of erasure, where the erasure “slides [out of itself] and it erases itself, does not maintain itself, silences itself, not as silence, but” as a ghost of itself (Derrida 332). It is important to keep in mind that the source text precedes the erasure as a *condition* of its possibility. That is, an erasure cannot be made without destruction. The erasure has to make the original unthinkable, invisible, but needs it, firstly, to be present in order for the redaction to render it (un)present. The erasure must erase itself and renounce being recognizable as a source by redaction, but ironically that which erased is assumed to be the missing centre despite being unavailable. It is there and elsewhere simultaneously, effectively suggesting that the erasure erases its signifieds in favour of its signifiers.

From the source, a chain of erasures, thereby also a chain of new centres, can be constructed, destroyed, and reconstructed whereby the very act of violence of redaction is simultaneously creative. The final question to be asked of the erasurist strategy is whether or not it can still signify without retention of any aspect of the original. For example, you take page 277 of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and redact all but the word “Nationalgymnasiummuseumsanatoriumandsuspensoriumsordinaryprivatdocentgeneralhistoryspecialprofessordoctor” (Joyce 277), does this still count as an erasure? Yes. But what if the entire page were redacted? Can an erasure be an erasure without some semblance of the original being permitted to remain untarnished? In hauntological terms, can the ghost exist without a body? Regardless of whether absent-presence is possible, the erasure, in the last instance, illustrates that the multiplicity of meanings, machinic in their (re)arrangements and rhizometric interactions, implicitly suggests that the central presence of the source text is, through the erasure, shown to have always-already never been itself, “has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute” (Derrida 354). As such, the source of erasure is best thought of as a *function*, whereby the erasure of that source can also be best thought of as a *sub-*

stitute of the source, therefore, an erasure being the source's substitute of itself: an erasure is "a writing which erases and retains itself" (Derrida 241).

Erasurism allows the reader a sort of second sight, whereby in redacting elements of the original, the erasure allows the reader to see in the source what it may not have allowed be seen in itself. It is in the erasure where the reader can 'feel', so to speak, the source in a way that would remain invisible had some part or parts of the source not been removed. This type of 'feeling' is only possible because the erasure is the source's phantom limb: affective albeit disappendaged, the erasure thus being, in the last instance, a prosthesis of itself. As such, the erasure haunts the source. The erasure is neither dead nor alive, is dead and alive at the same time. It survives the source, and yet, paradoxically, the source need die (a little) in order to survive itself as its own erasure. In this sense, the erasure is the living-dead source. What one is reading/listening to when encountering erasurist art is apparition, voices of other lives of sources or the revelation through obfuscation of the multiple 'spirits' in things. In the end, the erasurist ethos is concerned with revealing that there are multiple hermeneutical and aesthetic affects inherent within a source that can only be revealed through redaction, striking through, and disintegration.

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“In Your Own Words”:
Intertextuality and Erasure in Jacques Roubaud’s
Quelque chose noir

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In its simplest sense, erasure poetry involves the creation of novel poems by erasing and defacing existing texts, whether these be literary works, political speeches, or any other form of “found language”. Increasingly, critics are tracing the history of an “erasure poetics”, with focus going to the Anglophone world, where erasure practices have been most prevalent. While, as Travis Macdonald points out, such practices might be seen to have a longer pre-history, Ronald Johnson is nonetheless seen as the “father of *erasure-as-form*”.¹ Johnson’s erasure of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in *Radi os* (1977), alongside Tom Phillip’s contemporaneous *A Humument* (first edition: 1971), based on a little-known Victorian novel *A Human Document* by W. H. Mallock, are two pivotal texts in the development of this strand of practice. More recent works that have received significant critical attention include Jen Bervin’s *Nets* (2004), which effaces Shakespeare’s sonnets, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010), based on Bruno Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles*, and Travis Macdonald’s *The O Mission Repo* (2008), an erasure of “The 9/11 Commission Report” that exemplifies the increasingly political dimension of erasure poetry in recent years.² While such a lineage does not exist in the same way in France, similar practices can nonetheless be found. Located at the intersection of conceptual poetry and performance

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1. Travis Macdonald, “A brief history of erasure poetics”, in *Jacket magazine*, No. 38 (2009) <http://jacketmagazine.com/38/macdonald-erasure.shtml> [accessed 20 January 2018], (unpaginated).
 2. For further examples, and for a detailed history of erasure poetics in Anglophone practice, see Macdonald, “A brief history of erasure poetics”, (unpaginated), and Brian McHale, “Poetry under Erasure”, in Eva Muller-Zetzelmann and Margarete Rubik (eds), *New Approaches to the Lyric* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 278.

art, Jérémie Bennequin's work engages with literary figures such as Mallarmé and Baudelaire, whose oeuvres are submitted to processes that he labels "gommage" and "littérature". Bennequin's *ommage* (2008-2018), for example, involved the rubbing out, a page a day, of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, reprising the original themes of time and duration in a performance work that took ten years to complete. Beyond isolated examples of erasure poetry understood in its narrowest sense, poetic practices based on reworkings and revisions of pre-existing texts can be found throughout the history of modern French poetry, from Lautréamont's *Poésies* (1870), through to Oulipian constraints, such as "N+7", where nouns from source texts are systematically deleted and replaced by the 7th entry following that noun in the dictionary.

As Alison James notes, the Oulipo has been at the heart of a lively transatlantic exchange between American and French poets, mutually influenced in their constraint-based practices and writing procedures.¹ Jacques Roubaud, a member of the Oulipo, has been particularly central to this interaction, publishing, with Michel Deguy, the influential anthology *Vingt poètes américains* (1980), as well as translations of poets such as Charles Reznikoff (whose long poem *Testimony* reworks courthouse witness statements) and Jackson Mac Low (whose *Biblical Poems* erased passages from the Old Testament). This interaction with his American counterparts means that Roubaud was certainly aware of the erasure practices taking place on the other side of the Atlantic; indeed, in *Dire la poésie* (1981), we find direct references to both Johnson's *Radi os* and John Cage's haikus.² In this text, Roubaud draws parallels between Johnson and Cage's erasure practices, his own poetic procedures, as well as the writing and reading of poetry more generally. He evokes how any given poem involves infinite variations that are constantly transformed, effaced and revised with each reading (both the public readings of the poet, and the silent reading of the reader). This serves to situate erasure poetics on a continuum with other poetic practices, to identify how the notion of "erasure" might play out across all sorts of literary forms, and to underline what erasure practices can highlight about literary practice in general. Roubaud's *Dire la poésie*, where these references to erasure poetry appear, prefaces *Dors*, a collection that involves multiple revisions and variants of a single haiku, as well as translations of oral poems and ritual chants from Native American and Irish traditions. The text, like many others by Roubaud, is intimately concerned with revision, translation and intertextuality. To give just one further example, Roubaud's *La forme d'une ville change plus vite, hélas, que le cœur des humains* (1999) involves dialogistic reworkings of previous poets who had, in

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1. Alison James, "Transatlantic Oulipo: Crossings and Crosscurrents", in *Formules*, No. 16 (2012), p. 5-7.
 2. Jacques Roubaud, *Dors*, précédé de *Dire la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 21.

their turn, written poetry in and about Paris (Queneau, Apollinaire and Baudelaire, among others).

The present article will focus on the practices of intertextuality and erasure in Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir* (1986), a "livre de deuil", written after the death of the poet's young wife, Alix Cléo.¹ The diary that Alix kept in the years leading up to her death constitutes an important hypotext for the collection. Although not a straightforward work of erasure in the sense of Johnson's *Radi os* or Philip's *Humament*, *Quelque chose noir* reprises passages from Alix's diary, transforming and effacing them, deleting pronouns, modifying tenses, and replacing certain words with the poet's own. The notion of erasure penetrates not only the formal properties and compositional techniques of the collection, but its thematic concerns: questions of absence and presence, as well as the relationship between language, voice and identity after death. The text is of particular interest in the contrast it provides to recent, more political manifestations of erasure poetry: Macdonald's *The O Mission Repo* or Jerrod Schwartz's erasure of Donald Trump's Inaugural Speech in *PANK*, for example. As Manon Plante points out, in *Quelque chose noir* Alix's journal represents "un intertexte particulier par rapport aux textes appartenant à la tradition: elle est investie d'un affect fort, puisqu'elle se présente comme la dernière trace de l'amoureuse disparue".² The following discussion will pursue how, in the heightened context of grief, where the attention to the deceased lover's language is paramount, *Quelque chose noir* offers an idiosyncratic prism through which to approach a number of questions central to the study of erasure poetics.

Alix's Journal

In an article that explores how Roubaud employs the archive and the "copia" in his reinvention of the "tombeau poétique", Manon Plante argues that *Quelque chose noir* uses "la syntaxe de l'amoureuse comme contrainte".³ Alix's diary, the linguistic traces that remain after her death, could indeed be seen to operate as a transformative syntax, shaping the language, themes and imagery of Roubaud's subsequent poems. The diary itself records the life of a talented photographer, a doctoral student writing a thesis on Wittgenstein and developing a theory of the image. It also offers a more troubled portrait of a young woman struggling with mental illness, plagued by respiratory problems that led to a pulmonary embolism, causing her death at the age of 31. Alongside extended meditations on photography, memory and the image, the diary documents her symptoms, sleep-

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1. Jacques Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986). Henceforth: *QCN*.
 2. Manon Plante, "« La copia » de l'art de poésie: à propos de *Quelque chose noir* chez Jacques Roubaud", dans *Protée*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2007), p. 62.
 3. *Ibid*, p. 67.

less nights, remorseful mornings after periods of excessive drinking, and moments of acute despair. Foreshadowing the tragic circumstances of its conclusion, death is omnipresent in Alix's diary: in the fragmentary accounts of her suicide attempts, in the description of the loss of her close friend, the filmmaker Jean Eustache, and in her desperate addresses to her husband: "Tu vas me perdre, mon amour. [...] Je mérite la mort, stupide, inutile amoureuse. Tu me verras morte Jacques Roubaud".¹

Quelque chose noir then reprises Alix's words and phrases, revisiting the same themes, images and theoretical reflections. Many poems evoke the diaries directly, several are constructed entirely out of passages from the *Journal*, but even in the poems where this is not the case, her presence is felt in the formal characteristics employed throughout. Roubaud adopts Alix's idiosyncratic punctuation: her unusual use of colons, her erratic capitals, and the intra-sentential lacunae that leave blank spaces on the page. In a poem that reprises a brief yet distinctive fragment of Alix's *Journal* (154), the poet comments on this explicitly:

Tes photographies reproduites les phrases repro-
duites de ton Journal avec sa ponctuation particulière :
un.

(QCN, 61)

In a later poem, Roubaud evokes his adoption of Alix's punctuation again:

Quelque chose va sortir du silence, de la ponctuation,
du blanc remonter jusqu'à moi

Quelqu'un de vivant, de nommé : un poème d'amour

(QCN, 124)

If the blank spaces, borrowed from Alix's own writing, cannot bypass her absence, cannot conjure "quelqu'un de vivant" in the immediate sense of the words, they do nonetheless inscribe her into the fabric of the poem, creating, as the poem's title would suggest, a sustained "Dialogue" of sorts. These empty spaces lend themselves to a number of possible readings: on the one hand, they serve as a constant reminder of Alix's absence, presenting a simple yet powerful symbol that something is missing. On the other, they mark an irrefutable presence; they impose a rhythm on the text, punctuating it with hesitations and silences, mimicking, perhaps, Alix's troubled respiration, and thus sustaining her breathe in the very delivery of the poem. In their duality, the blank spaces in *Quelque chose noir* carry a similar symbolism to those found in erasure poetry more generally, where the gaps left behind in the text operate simultaneously as omissions and openings. Likewise, where the punctuation of *Quelque chose noir* underscores the collection's themes of absence and presence, erasure and resurrection, here we find a

1. Alix Cléo Roubaud, *Journal 1979-1983* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), p. 54. Henceforth: *J*.

further parallel with other erasure practices. As McHale aptly illustrates, the formal properties and compositional techniques of “poetry under erasure” are often complemented by a thematic exploration of “effacement” and its adjacent motifs.¹

“Devant ta mort je suis resté entièrement silencieux”

Quelque chose noir develops a network of motifs revolving around repetitions of the words “rien” and “silence”, both of which form part of longer reflections in Alix’s *Journal* (J, 72, 90, 116, 154). The structure of the collection, with its 9 sections of 9 poems of 9 stanzas, is disrupted by the inclusion of one isolated poem at the very end. This poem, entitled “Rien”, throws the neat structural arrangement of the preceding book off kilter, thus lending it a particular salience. Its closing words, and thus the closing words of the collection as a whole, are: “avant que la terre / émette / tant d’absence / que tes yeux / s’approchent / de rien” (QCN, 147-8). In *Quelque chose noir*, Roubaud figures Alix’s absence, the erasure of her bodily existence, through imagery based on light, colour and photography. At several points in the collection (QCN, 46, 91, 99), Roubaud depicts himself observing her photographs, “cette image qui te contient” (QCN, 32); these images, as well as Alix’s reflections on her own photographic practices in her diary, provide the vocabulary for Roubaud’s representation of her loss. In the poem “*Tu m’échappes*”, he writes:

Dans tout souvenir se perdent les couleurs. là tu es claire
ou sombre, c’est tout ce dont mon langage peut jouer.

Intérieurement tu me confines à tes photographies.

Tes couleurs m’échappent l’une par l’autre. comme tes phrases.

Siestes sépias.

(QCN, 127)

As the memory of Alix diminishes, the colourscapes of the collection are increasingly monochromatic, thus reducing Alix to the black and white configurations of the words and photographs she left behind. The title of the collection revises the title of a series of Alix’s photographs, *Si quelque chose noir*, exhibited in Arles in 1983. In the effacement of the conditional “si”, Roubaud insists on the absoluteness of this imposed monochromism, and, by extension, the absoluteness of her death. Elsewhere in *Quelque chose noir*, the descent into black and white goes a step further: “Je ne te nomme plus que comme incolore” (QCN, 68). Here, Roubaud draws on colour and colourlessness as a means to navigate the questions of loss, memory and identity; where colour sees language, image and corpo-

1. McHale, “Poetry under Erasure”, p. 278.

rality perpetually intertwined, he asks what constitutes a person, after death, what remains and what is irremediably lost. Against this backdrop, Roubaud then outlines a central motivation of the collection: having found that he cannot “parler de rien” (QCN, 130), he can, nonetheless attempt to “circonscire rien-toi avec exactitude” (QCN, 85), an idea to which I shall shortly return.

A second pivotal theme of *Quelque chose noir*, closely linked to the first, is that of silence: Alix’s now silent state; Jacques’s inability to write, muted by grief; the stillness of their once-shared flat. Again, the theme appears in Alix’s *Journal*, where she links it to both her photographs and her writing: “Photography is indeed a form of silence. But still a diary can show its silences, as an incomplete image its incompleteness” (J, 90). As if responding to this remark, *Quelque chose noir* depicts how grief dismantles the senses, so that the world can only be perceived as “an incomplete image”: “Je suis de temps myope” (QCN, 12). Roubaud evokes the tunnel vision of grief, as he obsessively revisits the same image, that of Alix’s dead body. In this effacement of the faculties, language is the first to go, as the poem “*Aphasie*” suggests: “Devant ta mort je suis resté entièrement silencieux. / Je n’ai pas pu parler pendant presque trente mois” (QCN, 131).

Thus, revisiting a frequent theme of the “livre de deuil”, Roubaud depicts the aphasia of his grief and the effacement of his language, rendered powerless and insufficient in the face of death, as words become “Comme des stèles” (QCN, 123), immobilised and emptied of their meaning.¹ The “aphasie” that Roubaud evokes is then performed in the formal properties of the collection: the blank spaces of its punctuation, its staccato rhythm, its often awkward syntax and its sometimes clumsy mode of expression.

Significantly, in his depiction of language’s insufficiency, Roubaud’s reflections form a dialogue with those found in Alix’s journal. In one passage, she describes “l’incapacité du langage à dire la vérité” (J, 73), and in a poem the reprises these themes, he writes: “La mort parle vrai. ta mort parlera toujours vrai. [...] le langage n’a pas de pouvoir” (QCN, 66-7). In a second passage, Alix evokes the “impossibilité d’écrire, mariée à un poète” (J, 126); Roubaud then revises her words, writing “Impossible d’écrire, marié(e) à une morte” (QCN, 63). Set against the impending threat of aphasia, there is, nonetheless, a way forward: if the poet cannot write himself, cannot portray Alix with his own words, then by employing the words from her diary, he can, to some degree, overcome the impasse of his grief. In a poem entitled “*Je ne peux pas écrire de toi*”, he writes: “Je ne peux pas écrire de toi plus véridiquement que toi-même. / Ce n’est pas que j’en sois incapable par nature, mais la vérité de toi, tu l’as écrite” (QCN, 121). Here, Roubaud

1. For a further exploration of the theme of aphasia in *Quelque chose noir*, see Dominique Rabaté, “« Maintenant sans ressemblance » : le temps du deuil et du poème (Deguy, Eluard, Roubaud)”, in Pierre Glaudes and Dominique Rabaté (eds), *Deuil et littérature, Modernités 21* (Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2005), pp. 319-332.

insists on the significance of Alix's words, which contain something of her own truth. This no doubt underpins his decision to publish her journals with Editions du Seuil in 1984, as well as the choice to reprise passages from her diaries in *Quelque chose noir*.¹ The journals themselves are presented with minimal editorial input; Alix's language is preserved in its absolute singularity, with its original typographic layout, its unusual punctuation, and its spelling mistakes. In this respect, it represents the "un-erased text" *par excellence*, and offers a stark contrast to the passages that are reprised and transformed in *Quelque chose noir*.

"Construire d'objets hétéroclites (une stratégie)"

The language of Alix's diary finds its way into *Quelque chose noir* in several ways: in titles, repeated words and phrases, and in whole poems constructed from Alix's original writings. Indeed, there are three poems assembled entirely out of passages from Alix's diaries (QCN, 15-16, 70, 71), and it is here that I wish to focus my attention, as they represent most clearly the practices of erasure at work in Roubaud's oeuvre. The first poem appears early in the collection, and returns to the image of Alix's cadaver, found by Jacques in their home, her still-warm hand hanging off the edge of the bed. It also evokes an earlier scene, described in Alix's *Journal*, where she had photographed her husband, eyes closed, in a state of rest, so that he appeared to be dead. She writes:

Évidemment, ce n'était pas un cadeau ordinaire celui de te livrer, à deux heures un dimanche après-midi, l'image de ta mort.

Photographier le sommeil (là où on ne se voit pas); furtif de photographie, comme si on voulait regarder et fixer l'aveuglement de l'autre, du photographié, comme si on voulait obturer ses sens, détourner son regard à jamais, comme si on voulait être seul au monde à voir du tout, et que le monde était tout entier vu.

La doublure des choses n'est pas une profondeur mystérieuse [...]. Ces choses pourraient ne pas être là, après tout: mais moi non plus, et avec moi disparaître le monde — telle est la folie de la photographie.

(J, 13)

Roubaud's poem then takes up Alix's words, sometimes repeating them exactly, sometimes editing and effacing them. In doing so, the poet interweaves two images—Alix's photograph of his pretend death, and his discovery of her body—accentuating their disjointed parallelism:

1. For a thorough analysis of the diaries, the conditions of their publication, and the relationship of Roubaud, as editor, to the text, see Véronique Montémont, "« Je t'aime jusque là » (Jacques Roubaud éditeur du *Journal d'Alix*)", in François Bessire (ed.), *Les Écrivains éditeurs* (Genève: Droz, 2002), pp. 207-19.

Je voulais détourner son regard à jamais

Je voulais détourner son regard à jamais. je voulais être
seul au monde à ne pas avoir vu du tout. cette main aurait
pu ne pas être là, après tout : mais moi non plus, et avec
moi disparaître le monde. ce cadeau. l'image de ta mort.

[...]

Pour une fois adéquation exacte de la mort même à la
mort rêvée, la mort vécue, la mort même même. identique
à elle même même.

[...]

Évidemment ce n'était pas un cadeau ordinaire. celui de
me livrer, à cinq heures du matin, un vendredi, l'image
de ta mort.

Pas une photographie.

La mort même même. Identique à elle même même.

(*QCN*, 15-16)

As Alix's words are appropriated and revised into the poem, Roubaud strips them of their original context; at the end of the first stanza, for instance, the words "ce cadeau. l'image de ta mort" erase the surrounding information provided in Alix's description, thus effacing the scene from their shared past. When these words reappear in the third from last stanza, the formulation is closer to the original passage, but the variations make more explicit the shift in context. The pronouns have changed and the details of the original scene are replaced with those of his discovery of her body "à cinq heures du matin, un vendredi". Roubaud marks the transition from Alix's theoretical reflections on photography, to the concrete reality of her death, by deleting the phrase "telle est la folie de la photographie", and replacing Alix's generic "Ces choses" with the specific details of the image of her dead body, "Cette main". The speculative formulation of Alix's meditations on photography, "comme si on voulait", is replaced with the first person, so that the hypothetical, conditional construction of Alix's "comme si on voulait être seul au monde" becomes the declarative and resolutely personal "je voulais être seul au monde". In such a way, Roubaud reprises Alix's words, but in deleting their allusion to a domestic scene between lovers, relegates this memory to an irrecoverable past. The past is overwritten, literally and metaphorically, by his own solitary present and the all-consuming image of her dead body. This is made explicit in Roubaud's reference to "la mort rêvée, la mort vécue, la mort même même. identique à elle même même", which revises Alix's words "l'amour rêvé, l'amour vécu, l'amour même même. Identique à lui-même même" (*J*, 14). Exploiting their phonological proximity, Roubaud replaces "l'amour" with

“la mort”, in a gesture that accentuates the desperate, myopic nature of grief and the destructive monopoly of death itself.

In the poem above we find two principal forms of revision that appear throughout the passages of *Quelque chose noir* that reprise Alix’s *Journal*. The first involves changes to the tenses and modality of Alix’s original words. To give just one representative example, in the transformation of Alix’s phrases “seules les configurations comptent / (tout le reste est blanc)” (*J*, 107), to “Les configurations comptaient seules. / (tout le reste fut et resta blanc)” (*QCN*, 71), we see the instauration of the past (in the imperfect and past historic tenses) and the effacement of the present. In the context of a “livre de deuil”, the symbolism of these minimal revisions hardly needs elaboration. A second frequent form of modification concerns personal pronouns. We saw above how the poet appropriates Alix’s words, inserting himself into the text and insisting on his own subjectivity by replacing an impersonal “on” with the first-person “je”, or substituting a second-person object pronoun “te” with “me”. Roubaud draws attention to how, of all parts of speech, personal pronouns exemplify the communal nature of language, which is only temporarily inhabited by its speaker. He then interrogates the relationship between language and identity, asking what to make of the words of a loved one, after her bodily existence ceases. In “*Portrait en méditation, IV*”, a further poem constructed entirely out of passages from Alix’s journal, Roubaud’s revision of pronouns takes a different form. The poem corresponds to the following passage from Alix’s journal:

Que vas-tu faire de moi, ma grisaille, mon manque de
consistance, mon désir de me taire le plus possible, par la
photo par exemple. Ou pourquoi la photo? parce qu’elle est
fragmentée et que, comme dans les aphorismes, la fragmenta-
-tion laisse voir les blancs entre les morceaux et c’est très
précisément là. Peut-être une esthétique de la ruine [...].

(*J*, 67)

In Roubaud’s poem, we read:

Laisserait voir : les blancs entre les morceaux.

Se tairait le plus possible, manquant de consistance, gri-
saille.

Se taire par la photo : aphorismes.

(*QCN*, 70)

From “ma grisaille” to “grisaille”, “mon manque de consistance” to “manquant de consistance”, and “me taire” to “se taire”, we find the deletion of Alix’s pronouns, and thus the erasure of personhood altogether. The poem then proceeds through a series of single lines, reworked from various passages of the *Jour-*

nal, now cast as depersonalised, infinitive verbs: “Se perdre”, “Séduire”, “Surveiller” (QCN, 70). The repetition of the verb “se taire” accentuates this omission, evoking Alix’s effective silencing in the text. Significantly, this poem appears in a series of poems entitled “Portraits en méditation”, and, as the opening line would suggest, the blank spaces left behind after the erasure of Alix’s pronominal forms conjure the duality of her presence/absence, already discussed. Two of the poems based entirely on Alix’s words are found in this series of “Portraits”, which leads Plante to observe that:

la série des « Portraits en méditation » campe l’image du poète, mais par les mots répétés d’Alix Cléo Roubaud. Il devient alors difficile de juger s’ils sont des portraits de la femme aimée ou des autoportraits.¹

The portraits are, as it were, doubled: on the one hand, they depict Alix “in her own words”, as both the trace of a once living, writing being, and as a now absent figure, whose loss is inscribed in the effacement and modification of her words. On the other, they depict Roubaud, in the slight but symbolic ways he appropriates her words, inflecting them with his own presence. He writes: “Tu écrivais pour n’être lue que morte, [...] je t’ai lue, toi morte, et faite mienne” (QCN, 121).

As Plante points out, in her consideration of the extract from the *Journal* given above, Alix’s address to Jacques poses, albeit indirectly, the question of intertextuality and the archive. “Que vas-tu faire de moi” (*J*, 67) might also be read as “que fera-t-on du corps de ses écrits lorsque la mort l’aura emportée?”² In the poem that reworks this particular passage, we find one possible response: “Construire d’objets hétéroclites (une stratégie)” (QCN, 70). Stripped of its contextual surroundings, the phrase might seem insignificant, but considered alongside the passage from Alix’s journal that it is extracted from, this “stratégie” gains more relevance. Considering Lautréamont’s famous evocation of “la rencontre du parapluie et de la machine à coudre”, Alix describes a “loi de tout un genre photographique :coexistence d’objets hétéroclites(et aussi en poésie,dit Jacques:the strategy of disconnected trivia) [...] donnant une sorte de loi de réalité ou d’effet de réel” (*J*, 80). Establishing a form of dialogue with Alix’s original reflection, or indeed continuing the dialogue that Alix refers to in the passage itself, Roubaud’s “stratégie” can be read as a metapoetic comment, and an identification of his own poetics. Indeed, in the context of this “ready-made” poem, we see the composition of an “objet hétéroclite” at work: the juxtaposition of variegated fragments of Alix’s language, which are assembled in the quest for some “effet de réel”. If, as Roubaud writes, Alix’s words do indeed contain something that is inerasably Alix, “Images de toi, ces mots. / Tes lettres. / Ton écriture” (QCN, 34), then re-

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1. Plante, “« La copia » de l’art de poésie”, p. 64.
 2. *Ibid*, p. 64.

peating them in the poem allows for the construction of a portrait, however imperfect, of their original author. Again, here we recall Alix's meditations, elsewhere in the *Journal*, on the notion of repetition and singularity. She evokes how, in photography, each repetition involves an absolute singularity, and thus an addition of sorts, rather than a mere reprise (*J*, 41). As if in response to Alix's exhortation, "faire danser le singulier, le répéter [...] Répéter le singulier et le faire chanter. Répéter" (*J*, 20), *Quelque chose noir* pursues a poetics, based on repetition, which desires a form of continuation or addition, where the singularity of Alix's words will once again be voiced.

"Tu n'étais pas découpée en rectangle dans le monde"

If the reprisal of Alix's words might, at times, offer a means of continuation when the creative process is halted by grief, the poet is quick to delineate the limitations of such a "stratégie". Addressing Alix in the poem "*La certitude et la couleur*", Roubaud writes: "Tu n'étais pas blanche et noir plate. l'étais-tu? / Tu n'étais pas découpée en rectangle dans le monde" (*QCN*, 57). The phrase allows for a three-fold reading—simultaneously evoking Alix's photographs, her diaries, and now his own poems—none of which correspond with Alix's previous existence, in all its colour, shape and three-dimensionality. These lines recall the reflections in the poem "*Tu m'échappes*", cited above, that evoke how, after death, Alix's colour and depth are erased, leaving flat, monochrome traces. While these traces may contain something of her, as Roubaud says, for example, of her photographs ("cette image qui te contient", *QCN*, 32), they are nonetheless immobilised in their finitude ("ton image / Qui, elle, ne dira plus rien", *QCN*, 65). He writes:

Chaque image de toi — je parle de celles qui sont dans
mes mains, devant mes yeux, sur les papiers — chaque
image touche la trace d'une reconnaissance, l'illumine,

Mais elle est pourtant révolue, elles sont révolues, cha-
cune et toutes, ne constituent en leur configurations
aucune vie, aucun sens, aucune leçon, aucun but.

(*QCN*, 112)

Consequently, in *Quelque chose noir*, Roubaud sets out to depict Alix's identity after death in all its complexity, to "circonscrire *rien-toi* avec exactitude" (*QCN*, 85). As traces of her former existence, reprising her words, repeating her name, allows for a certain "reconnaissance". "Te nommer", he writes, "c'est faire briller la présence d'un être antérieur à la disparition" (*QCN*, 87). At the same time, we witness his desire to represent precisely the hollow, two-dimensionality of these traces, no longer embodied or attached to a worldly presence. As Plante writes:

Ni la photographie ni l'écriture ne seront convoquées dans *Quelque chose noir* dans le but de donner l'illusion d'une présence ou la fiction d'un sens: ces documents provoquent l'expérience radicale de la négativité.¹

This “négativité” is then performed in the formal properties and compositional techniques of the collection: in the erased passages from Alix's diaries, and in the structural constraint, based on the number 9. As Jean-François Puff points out, 9 is “un carré: le carré de trois. Un carré, c'est-à-dire, une surface, non un volume. Chacun des poèmes est ainsi l'équivalent formel d'une surface de forme géométrique”.² Playing on the phonological proximity of “trois” and “toi”, Roubaud highlights how Alix herself forms the pivot to the album's structure: “trois fois toi trois des irréductiblement / séparés déplacées réels de toi” (QCN, 61). As the portraits of Alix multiply, as her words are repeatedly revisited and revised, they are nonetheless confined to an endlessly two-dimensional space. Puff, however, concludes his argument on a more optimistic note:

On peut néanmoins objecter que, si chaque poème de *Quelque chose noir* est bien un carré, le livre, lui, présente neuf séries de neuf poèmes. La formule d'ensemble serait donc neuf au cube, soit un espace à trois dimensions.³

In his analysis, Puff goes on to pursue the possibility of a three-dimensional space, subsequently emphasising the creative potential of the poem. Puff's reading of *Quelque chose noir* thus joins that of several other critics, who wish to accentuate something of the transformative quality of the “livre de deuil”. For example, much has been written on the importance of dialogue in the collection: Elisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck describes the continuity of “une sorte de dialogue outre-tombe” between the *Journal* and *Quelque chose noir*, and Plante argues that the collection's “double écriture” and its “interpénétration des voix” ensures the survival of Alix's voice, by its preservation within a literary tradition of the “tombeau”.⁴ The dialogistic dimension of *Quelque chose noir* is certainly present, with the poems providing responses to the questions and exhortations of the *Journal*. Alix writes “sauve-moi de la nuit difficile” (*J*, 37); Jacques replies “Je ne t'ai pas sauvée de la nuit difficile” (QCN, 20). Alix's warning “Tu me verras morte Jacques Roubaud. On viendra te chercher. Tu identifieras mon cadavre” (*J*, 54) finds its response in the simple affirmation that concludes the collection's penultimate poem: “J'ai reconnu ta mort et je l'ai vue” (QCN, 143). Roubaud addresses this dimension of his practice directly in the poem “*Dialogue*”. Although he be-

1. *Ibid*, p. 62.

2. Jean-François Puff, “L'écriture photographique de *Quelque chose noir*”, in *Formes poétiques contemporaines*, No. 2 (2004), p. 322.

3. *Ibid*, p. 322.

4. Elisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck, “Poésie, forme de vie”, dans *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1992), p. 101. Plante, “« La copia » de l'art de poésie”, p. 66.

gins by stating “Je n’ai jamais pensé à un poème comme étant un monologue [...] Un poème se place toujours dans les conditions d’un dialogue virtuel”, the poem’s conclusion returns to the futility of such a gesture: “Ce poème t’est adressé et ne rencontrera rien” (QCN, 124-5). This same poem contains the passage, cited above, where the poet describes his desire to conjure some form of presence: “Quelque chose va sortir du silence, de la ponctuation, / du blanc [...] Quelqu’un de vivant, de nommé : un poème d’amour”. Returning to these words, we see how Roubaud offers a deliberately ambiguous depiction of what power poetry has. The poet wavers, sometimes accentuating its potential, its capacity to offer *something* (“quelque chose”, “un poème d’amour”), elsewhere stressing its limitations, its failure to provide anything more than a finite, two-dimensional portrait. No form of posthumous dialogue will bring back that crucially absent “Quelqu’un de vivant”, as the poet’s desperate address, a few poems later, would suggest: “Écris, écris toi vivante” (QCN, 139). A poetics based on “la résurrection de certains mots” (QCN, 61) is an unsatisfactory solution at best, and the creative potential of poetry stumbles continuously against the absolute finitude of death.

Conclusion

It is here, I believe, that *Quelque chose noir* harnesses two of the fundamental properties of erasure poetry, recoding their significance by integrating them into the idiosyncratic thematic concerns of the collection. Erasure practices form part of a broader movement in modernist and post-modernist poetry, where direct expression and lyric inspiration have been supplanted by procedural, conceptual and, to reprise Kenneth Goldsmith’s words, “uncreative” writing.¹ Artistic creation, in its traditional sense, has been usurped by intertextual practices, as Marjorie Perloff points out in *Unoriginal Genius*:

Inventio is giving way to appropriation, elaborate constraint, visual and sound composition, and reliance on intertextuality. Thus we are witnessing a new poetry, more conceptual than directly expressive [...].²

Effacing “found language” and “ready-made” texts, erasure practices foreground these questions of creativity, originality, lyricism and their alternatives. A second defining dimension of erasure poetry is that it operates by subtraction. As Macdonald points out in his analysis of Johnson’s *Radi os*, traditional poetry seeks to “*make visible*” the world, by creation or addition, whereas erasure poetry “consists of reversing this work; revealing the world, instead, through *the sub-*

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1. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
 2. Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 11.

traction (or blinding) of that very same verse”.¹ These constitutive properties of erasure poetry—the principle of subtraction, and the pursuit of creativity by other means—are woven into the thematic concerns of *Quelque chose noir*, with its consideration of grief, identity, aphasia, and loss. When grief immobilises the creative process, the poet must find a way to inscribe Alix, to honour and preserve her. Between the “limites étroites” of the poem, Roubaud writes, “je dois essayer de me tendre et te dire, encore” (QCN, 86). After her death, Alix’s identity is now complete, in the sense that its finitude is realised, and will no longer be *creative*; thus, through processes of intertextuality, repetition and erasure, Roubaud constructs her “portrait” out of the finite fragments she left behind. In effacing, deleting and inflecting her words with his own, the poet marks Alix’s subtraction from the text, inscribing her loss, and encoding the erasure of his own language in the face of her death.

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Making Paper Liquid: Thoughts on Erasure and Translation in the Poetry of Uljana Wolf

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Residing prominently along the margins of literary history for decades, appropriation literature has recently undergone a renaissance among academics, critics, and writers alike.¹ This is not to say that the hybrid practices of what Gérard Genette once coined *la littérature au second degré* or, more generally, the Barthesian concept of a text as always created of “multiple writings”² ever fell out of favour within literary discourse. Yet reiterative and citational practices of de- and re-contextualization, strongly advocated by conceptual poets,³ are beginning to see a revitalization spurred on by the cultural momentum of the digital age (e.g., artistically advanced copy-and-paste techniques); and it is within this accelerated global proliferation, circulation, and violent manipulation of texts, images, and bodies, as erasurist Travis Macdonald postulates, that one of the most commonly known and practiced forms of appropriative reductionism, erasure poetry, “concerning itself with the deliberate removal (or covering over) of words on the page rather than their traditionally direct application thereto,”⁴ appears to be flourishing again, unfolding new creative and critical potential.

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1. See, for example, *Reprint: Appropriation (&) Literature*, edited by Annette Gilbert, Wiesbaden: luxbooks, 2014.
 2. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, 143–148, 148.
 3. See the introductory essays by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith to their seminal volume *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011.
 4. Travis Macdonald, “A Brief History of Erasure-as-Form,” in *Jacket* 2 38 (2009), n.pag, available at: <http://jacketmagazine.com/38/macdonald-erasure.shtml> (accessed 20 February 2018).

In recent German-language poetry, this tendency can be felt most prominently in *SONNE FROM ORT* by Uljana Wolf and Christian Hawkey, a collaborative erasure piece of Rainer Maria Rilke's German translation of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. It is no wonder that they connect erasure to the literary politics of another so-called second-order form of signification, namely translation, which is central to their poetical thought, as well as that of many contemporary poets. There is certainly no other current body of work in German literature (perhaps apart from the philological writings of Yoko Tawada) in which engagement with the theories and strategies of translation (both as model and metaphor) causing poetry and language to turn upon themselves becomes more evident than that of Uljana Wolf. In the following, I shall examine how Wolf's disruptive and playful use of erasure emerges in the context of her translational poetics and, accordingly, consider how particular forms of both rewriting practices are linked.

According to Emily Apter, translation offers a "particularly rich focus for discussions of creative property and the limits of ownership"¹ (one of the main if not the most important attacking points that defines appropriation art). But where Apter sees translation in general as a "unique case of art as [...] authorized plagiarism,"² practices of erasure (or effacement) inherently run the risk of copyright violation. Nevertheless, both translation and erasure claim "to be of the original" and are "possessed of no autonomous textual identity,"³ and this is where they become of particular interest for Wolf, as they both make "paper liquid"⁴—not only on the linguistic level (lettering, syntax, lexis, diction, metrics, pragmatics, discourse), but, as we shall see, also in the very basic sense of non-linguistic materiality (the position of text on paper, the white space of the page, the materiality of the color applications, the deletions, the tools, and techniques, et cetera⁵).

One of Wolf's first published erasures can be found in the last section of her second book, *falsche freunde*. First it should be noted that there is obviously a strong vein of postcolonial criticism running through her illegal crossings (English "false friends," French "faux amis"), which operate in categories of linguistic,

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1. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, New York: Verso, 2013, 303.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. Uljana Wolf, "Whiting Out, Writing In, or," translated by Katy Derbyshire, in *Asymptote* 2012, n.pag. www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/uljana-wolf-whiting-out-writing-in (accessed 6 December 2017). The original German version of the essay (in a different form), entitled "AUSWEISSEN, EINSCHREIBEN," is available at karawana.net, <http://karawana.net/content/ausweissen-einschreiben-uljana-wolf> (accessed 5 March 2018).
 5. Following Annette Gilbert's definition of erasure as an appropriative procedure of selection: "Book Pirates: On a New Art Making Books," in *Reprint*, 49–77, 68.

cultural, social, political, temporal, and spatial liminality. The long poem entitled “Alien II: Liquid Life” incorporates a series of deletions from official websites, industry manuals, government documents, and magazine and newspaper articles¹ to investigate how biometric data constitutes the translational—in the double meaning of the German word *übersetzen*, referencing both “translation” (*über-setzen*) and “transportation” (*über-setzen*, with stress on the first syllable)—psycho-geography of airports in the post 9/11² world:

Durch Piktogramme [] wird der Teilnehmer []
 gültig []
 frei [] und gleich []
 Im inneren []
 erzeugt []
 der lokale []
 Andere []
 manuelle [] Grenz []
 Spuren [] im [] Bereich B
 des []
 Teilnehmer] s [³

As with many of her experimental works, the treatment of the selected material is executed with reference to an array of theoretical frameworks. In this case, Wolf makes reference to Brian Massumi’s reflections on the gateways and thresholds of present societies of control (Deleuze),⁴ where (disembodied) subjects are classified and judged by algorithms (e.g., as either a citizen of a country or a foreigner) into liquid entities. More generally, Wolf references Zygmunt Bauman’s examinations of the vicissitudes, precariousness, and uncertainties of contemporary, “liquid” modern societies, to whom the poem owes its title (“Liquid life”).⁵ Thus, the erasure piece sets out to render visible—here, through clinically parsing (reducing) the Website of the ABG pilot program for automated border control of Germany’s Federal Police—how biometric scanners are copying and hence

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1. All source material is transparently marked and listed in the “written-with” appendices at the end of the book.
 2. In contrast, the first poem in the section, “Alien I: eine Insel”, deals with the spatiality and linguistic violence of crossing borders from a historical perspective by re-transcribing medical examination checklists of immigrants at the inspection station on Ellis Island.
 3. Uljana Wolf, *falsche freunde*. Idstein: kookbooks, 2009, 78–79. This is a simplified schematization of the erasure: square brackets indicate the space before and between the lines.
 4. In contrast to the “disciplinary societies” (Foucault) of the eighteenth and nineteenth century: Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” in *October* 59 (1992), 3–7.
 5. Two quotes, one from an interview by Mary Zournazi with Brian Massumi—“Navigating movements,” in Mary Zournazi (ed.), *Hope: new philosophies for change*. Annandale: Pluto, 2002, 210–244—and one from Zygmunt Bauman’s *Liquid Life*, Cambridge: Polity, 2005, precede the poem.

othering aliens (“Im inneren [/] erzeugt [/ der lokale [/] Andere [/] manuelle Grenz [/] Spuren [”] into ghostly (liquid) data-doubles that circulate detached from their original body.

In doing so, the poem demonstrates that the interplay between linguistic material and non-linguistic visual aspects (here, e.g., the position of the text on the paper, the white space of the page) is always a crucial factor in erasure poetry. By rhythmically scattering fragmented, yet plain, recognizable syntactic and morphological clusters of deletion over the page, Wolf discloses the source text’s ideology of control: “Durch Piktogramme [/] wird der Teilnehmer [/] gültig [.” At the same time, a shapeless, nebulous body precipitates from the white space of the page through acting and reacting to the extracted words and jumbled lines.

There is a conflicted ambivalence to this; what one recognizes, in the first place, is precisely that liquid entity achieving its individual status (class, ethnicity, gender, social status, economic status) on the basis of reductive biological data (iris recognition scanners, fingerprint readers, whole-body scanners). Liquid, then, is a discursive totality that needs to be understood in terms of a top-down border hegemony that determines if someone is eligible to enter and remain (or to migrate) in a (developed) country or not, as exposed by the long poem’s first lines: “[/] hochwertige [/ einwand- [/] er [/] er [/] sind zu entneh- / men [.”¹ More generally, it can be interpreted through the lens of an all-encompassing doctrine of surveillance. The poem pessimistically concludes in erasing parts of the ESTA² program of the U.S. Department of Security: “[/] There is no [/ privacy [.”³

On the other hand, Wolf’s processual cascade of lettering, spacing, and recombining reclaims the very bodily grammar of the alien in the sense that the linguistic and non-linguistic material as such can never be entirely circumscribed or controlled, producing new forms of tactile, aural, visual, spatial, and temporal “maneuverability.”⁴ In other words, she overturns the discriminatory (symbolic and discursive) practice of data appropriation with the material vigor of appropriative erasurism, short-circuiting the capitalist “data imperative”⁵ of identity. The erasurist dialectics of collecting and deleting, therefore, proves to be an effective interventionist strategy against the biometric border conditions that characterize global uncertainties and shifting realities (“Liquid Life”).

There is also a biographical aspect to be considered: Wolf is married to Christian Hawkey, himself an American poet, and they are both living in transit

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1. Wolf, *falsche freunde*, 74.
 2. Electronic System for Travel Authorization.
 3. Wolf, *falsche freunde*, 82.
 4. Zournazi and Massumi, “Navigating movements,” 212.
 5. Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy, “Seeing like a market,” in *Socio-Economic Review* 15 (2017), 9–29, 13.

between Berlin and New York.¹ Selecting Rilke's translation of Barrett Browning's Victorian *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as source material for their collaborative erasure, then, negotiates a wide range of contextual reference points: Firstly, and most generally, it marks another compelling and complex variation on the way in which the sonnet continually explores genre-based boundaries between tradition and renewal.² Secondly, it ties in with the self-referential and metapoetic dimension of the love sonnet, operating in line with Petrarchan tradition. Thirdly, the Petrarchan secrecy of the hidden dialogue between Elizabeth, the *poetess*, and Robert Browning, the *poet* (and her husband), through the disguise of a "pseudo-translation"³ is structurally mirrored in the relationship between Wolf and Hawkey, which, again, is overall framed by Rilke's particular affection for the Sapphic tradition⁴ of the loving poets.⁵

It is within this logic of relation that Wolf and Hawkey create a new poetic text that results from a multiplicity of textual constellations intertwined in a constrained practice of erasure. In contrast to "Alien II: Liquid Life," *SONNE FROM ORT* should be considered as appropriation literature in the very strict sense of Gilbert's definition, as it is "the appropriation of an entire work in its materiality as such."⁶ Joshua Weiner aptly describes the totality of the dialogical pairings of authors, texts, and languages as islands facing each other—"as a metaphor for the *enface* erasure book itself"⁷—spanning an archipelago, with *SONNE FROM ORT* facing the translation by Rilke, which faces Barrett Browning's sonnets, which faces a book of Portuguese originals that never existed.

Although not mentioned by Weiner, the notion of the archipelago points to some foundational aspects of both Hawkey's and Wolf's writing. In *Ventrakl*, Hawkey uses a variety of experimental methods (e.g., cut-up, homophonic translation, online translation engines, relay translations) to translate and engage with

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1. Wolf teaches German at New York University.
 2. Yet there still exists a prevailing notion among readers, critics, and sonneteers alike that it should be governed by an extremely rigid and restrictive set of formal conventions.
 3. Following Gideon Toury's seminal definition as "texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other languages ever having existed" (*Descriptive Translation Studies – and Beyond*, Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995, 40).
 4. See, for example, Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6, Frankfurt a. M.: 1966, 924–931.
 5. Also, in relation to his translation of the Sonnets of Lousie Labé, see Andreas Wittbrodt, "Rainer M. Rilkes Übersetzung der Sonette Elizabeth Barrett Brownings sowie Louise Labés und ihr Bezug zum Petrarkismus," in *Rilke und die Weltliteratur*, edited by Manfred Engel and Dieter Lamping, Düsseldorf; Zürich, Artemis & Winkler, 1999, 168–187.
 6. Gilbert, "Book Pirates: On a New Art Making Books," 51.
 7. Joshua Weiner, "Friday Pick: SONNE FORM ORT by Uljana Wolf and Christian Hawkey," in *Body*, April 2014, n.pag. <http://bodyliterature.com/friday-pick-sonne-from-ort-by-uljana-wolf-christian-hawkey/> (accessed 27 January 2018).

the poetry of Georg Trakl. Furthermore, he conceptualizes his procedure as a ghostly “collaboration” (with Trakl) captured in a chapter long meditation on transformation and translation, entitled “an argument for archipelagos.”¹ In Wolf’s third collection of poetry, *meine schönste lengevitch*, which was published shortly after *SONNE FROM ORT*, her writings on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and, most recently, in her translation of Erin Mouré, it becomes clear that she, and surely Hawkey, too, make use of Édouard Glissant’s figure of the de-centered, constantly reforming and reshaping archipelago from his treatise *Poétique de la Relation*, and in particular Glissant’s poetics of translation; finally, it is Uljana Wolf’s work that can be described as this: a poetics of relation.

It is not surprising, then, that it is Wolf who writes an illuminating essay (“Whiting Out, Writing In, or”)² on the collaboration with her husband that in fact would have made an excellent afterword (and should be read precisely as such) to *SONNE FROM ORT*, which of course includes the fully erased afterword by Elisabeth Kinderlen to the Insel edition of Rilke’s translation, in order to remain faithful to the overall concept. Wolf explains the poetics and constraints of the collaborative work process of her “double erasureship” with Hawkey, involving both poets reworking every part of the selected material with correction fluid, in alternating order,³ with the pages of the current bilingual Insel edition of Rilke’s translation as their working surface.

In a way it all starts with Rilke, who once famously called the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* one of the “großen Vogelrufe des Herzens in der Landschaft der Liebe”⁴ (“one of the great bird calls of the heart in the landscape of love”⁵). Wolf takes this up and uses the metaphor of *Zugunruhe*, meaning the migratory drive in birds (literally “migratory restlessness”), to conceptualize the whiting-out of the “starting texts” as “a technique for recording the migratory orientation of captive texts”⁶—this most obviously reads as an intertextual variation of Stephen T. and John T. Emlen’s paper “A Technique for Recording Migratory Orientation of Captive Birds”—by comparing it to an Emlen funnel experiment, where ink colors the bird’s (the poet’s) claws and marks its (the text’s) directorial orientation⁷:

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1. See Christian Hawkey, *Ventrakl*, New York: Ugly Duckling, 2010. Cf. 2nd edition 2013, 27–41.
 2. One has to acknowledge that often it is impossible to write about Wolf because everything you might want to say, illuminate, or criticize about her work, is very likely to have been said already by her, better.
 3. E.g., Rilke-Wolf, Rilke-Hawkey, Wolf-Hawkey-Rilke, Hawkey-Rilke-Wolf, et cetera.
 4. Ingeborg Schnack, Rainer Maria Rilke. *Chronik seines Lebens und seines Werkes*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1996, 718.
 5. See Weiner’s translation in “Friday Pick: SONNE FORM ORT,” n.pag.
 6. Wolf, “Whiting Out, Writing In, or,” n.pag. and Stephen T. and John T. Emlen’s, “A Technique for Recording Migratory Orientation of Captive Birds,” in *The Auk* 83 (1966), 361–367.
 7. Cf. Wolf, “Whiting Out, Writing In, or,” n.pag.



In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnet IV," the voice of the *poetess* is compared to that of another *poet*: "my cricket chirps against thy mandolin,"¹ with the "cricket" presumably referring to Elizabeth and the "mandolin" to Robert Browning. In Hawkey's and Wolf's above-quoted erasure, however, the *poetess* chirps not "against" the *poet*, but, as it were, constitutively from "]" within [" the lines, removed from any self-doubt.

As Kinderlen writes in her afterword, Rilke reads *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as reverberations of a broken, invalid, and insecure, yet passionately and passible Elizabeth, (over-)highlighting feminine devotion and self-abandonment in his translation.² While acknowledging his aesthetic virtuosity, Joanna M. Catling points to these shortcomings of Rilke's version that appear to be in line with a then as now common reading, but overall hastily generalization of the original.³

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1. Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, *Sonette aus dem Portugiesischen. Übertragen von Rainer Maria Rilke. Englisch und Deutsch*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1999, 12.
 2. See Elizabeth Kinderlen, "Nachwort," in Elizabeth Barret Browning, *Sonette aus dem Portugiesischen. Übertragen von Rainer Maria Rilke. Englisch und Deutsch*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1999, 94–100, 100.
 3. This applies especially to Barrett-Browning's use of death metaphors. See Joanna M. Catling, "Rilke als Übersetzer: Elizabeth Barrett-Brownings Sonnets from the Portuguese," in *Rilke – ein europäischer Dichter aus Prag*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998, 85–103, 96.

Hence, Wolf and Hawkey write underneath this narrative, and literally undercut and elude Rilke's reductive sentiment by amplifying the voice of the *poetess*.

Moreover, the German "Grille" directs away from Rilke (i.e., another erased "mandolin")—who, as many poet-translators, had an ambivalent relationship to the source language—to the female voice of his essential co-translator, Alice Faehndrich. Wolf asserts that the acknowledgement of her contribution is lost in changing the former dedication to the work they shared ("in Erinnerung an gemeinsame Arbeit") to an in-memoriam note in later editions ("In memoriam / Alice Faehndrich").¹ The reworking of the translation becomes an act of metatranslative recovery, through which Faehndrich's concealed authorial presence is inversely made visible by erasing Rilke's version. The above quoted segments read as a self-referential conversation between two artisans/translators about the right choice of parts/movements/words—""] gefällt dir dieser [/ Griff [] ? [Ist [/ da [/] ein [] arm dafür? ["—which eventually indicates that it is the chirping voice of the female co-translator that lays the foundation of the text and guides the process as it constitutes the house/the translation to be build: ""] meine Grille [/] macht [] das Haus [/] auß [."

Although not designed to be a history of erasure, Wolf weaves into her essay pieces about the genre's various mutations, beginning with juxtaposing a short prose portrait of the first Emlen funnel experiment and a translated fragment from Sappho: ""] don't you remember [/ we, too, did such things in our youth."² MacDonald reads the square brackets that indicate gaps in the text (e.g., where the papyrus scroll is torn or the citation breaks off), as early material signifiers of erasure that virtually complete the "stanza insofar as it manages to resonate with our modern sensibilities."³ It is within the extension of space before and between the two lines that Wolf stylistically connects Sappho to the footprint technique of the Emlen funnel—i.e., her foundational notion of the migratory text and, accordingly, the notion of erasure as an innovative and constitutive disability of language that was always operative, as, too, conveyed in the form of the essay: ""] these [/ movements, in radial pattern, facing South, [/] don't you remember [/ we, too, did such things in our youth."⁴

In disclosing the hidden layers of the unexplored collaborative interaction between Rilke and Faehndrich, the German poet points to what in particular lies at the core of her and Hawkey's erasure piece, and the poetics of erasure in general, that is, questioning singular authorship and the concept of the original by radically unwrapping the unity of the selected material. The formal and semantic

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1. Faehndrich died shortly after the first edition of Rilke's translations was published in 1908.
 2. Cf. Wolf, "Whiting Out, Writing In, or," n.pag.
 3. Macdonald, "A Brief History of Erasure-as-Form," n.pag.
 4. Jim Powell (trans.), *The Poetry of Sappho*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, [Voigt 24.2–4], 9.

features metamorphose in the whited-out surface spaces between and beyond words; broken up and reconnected lines, stanzas, and languages set “a slumbering text”¹ in motion, migrating off the page (*Zugunruhe*).

The outcome belongs neither to the author, nor the translator, nor the erasurist, but—and here Wolf is alluding to William Burroughs and Brion Gysin²—to the “*Third mind* [of collaboration]”³ that, as Macdonald puts it, “arises [...] from the creative friction between two inherently different sets of aesthetic tendencies.”⁴ However, what distinguishes *SONNE FROM ORT* from, for example, recent erasure projects—such as Jen Bervin’s widely received *Nets*⁵—is that, here, translation adds another aesthetic tendency that is not inherently different from erasure.

Much has been said and written about the return to form in recent poetry, with Oulipian constraints, polyglossia, and theory-bound writing being a large part of that discussion. In this context, I propose, as a first step, to read Wolf’s collaborative erasure as a kind of conceptual translation strategy⁶ that emerges from a planned and thought-through *idea* that is carried out to completion, the realization process through which translation becomes able to describe itself.

The process of transforming the original poem and the translation challenges the categories underlying the text—i.e., the simplified schemes of translation theory: original and translation, author and translator, source language and target language. For example, the white-out redactions bring into focus the fact that translation always already activates the language being translated from and the one translated to. This is most obvious in the bilingual title *SONNE FROM ORT*⁷ that shows, as poignantly summed up by Gilbert, “the inextricable interlacing of voices across eras, generations, languages.”⁸

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1. Uljana Wolf, “Whiting Out,” n.pag.
 2. See William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind*, New York: The Viking Press, 1978.
 3. Uljana Wolf, “Whiting Out,” n.pag.
 4. Travis Macdonald, “A Brief History of Erasure-as-Form,” in *Jacket* 2 38 (2009), n.pag. <http://jacketmagazine.com/38/macdonald-erasure.shtml>. Accessed 3 February 2018.
 5. Again, a take on Shakespeare’s sonnets. Hawkey and Wolf seem to be greatly inspired by Bervin’s erasure work, notably her poetic and conceptual investigation of material and page design in her books *The Desert* and *The Niagara Book*.
 6. Parts of this text are based on an article entitled “Displaced Writing: Surface Translation as Post-Conceptual Rewriting in Contemporary German Poetry,” currently under review for a book chapter in *Sound/Writing: traduire-écrire entre le son et le sens, Homophonic translation – traducson – Oberflächenübersetzung*, edited by Vincent Broqua and Dirk Weissmann. Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2019.
 7. According to Wolf, the title refers to Rilke, the Villa Discopoli on Capri (“sun”), where he began to translate Browning’s *Sonnets*, and the interplay of English and German, “even retaining an echo of Elizabeth’s London in the Os” (Wolf, “Whiting Out,” n.pag.).
 8. Gilbert, *Reprint*, 530.

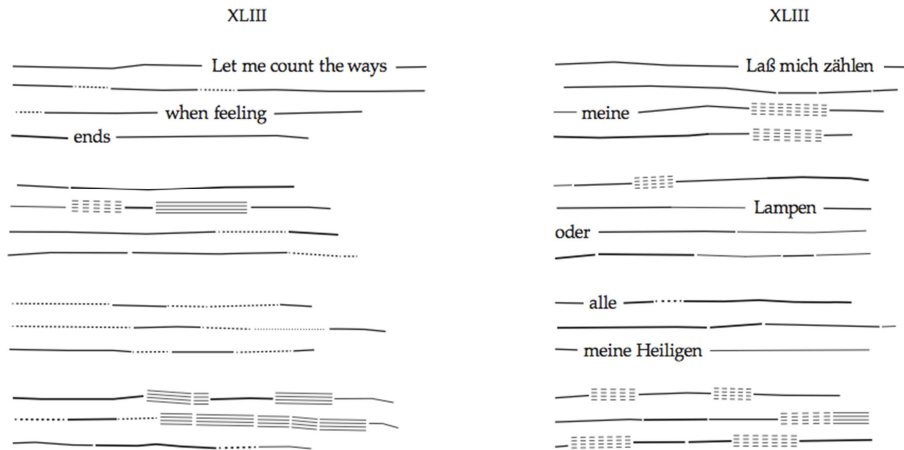
Further parallels could be drawn with the works of founding conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt (“The idea becomes a machine that makes the art”¹) or Joseph Kosuth (*Art as Ideas*). In conceptual poetry, then, in Kenneth Goldsmith’s words, the idea often appears to be “much more interesting than the resultant text.”² But even though conceptual art practices can provide a key to understanding the contemporaneity of poetry in the digital age, Craig Dworkin acknowledges that conceptual art and conceptual writing (as translation) cannot simply be equated for various reasons—one being that in poetry, “the relation of the idea to the word is necessary but not privileged: these are still poems made of words.”³

With regard to this crucial difference, it should be noted that Wolf and Hawkey create an intuitive balance between concept and execution rather than an intellectual “supremacy of concept over execution.”⁴ It is especially in this sense that I may, as a second step, consider their translational poetics of erasure as post-conceptual. Wolf conceptually reflects and refracts the processes and categories that bring into being and frame language, translation, and poetry but never fetishizes the use of decontextualized appropriations as refined manifestations of ideas. Her works are neither “detailless” nor “empty,”⁵ nor do they follow Goldsmith’s Dadaist reconfiguration of (non-)reading.

One of the basic conditions of erasure is, as we have already seen, making the materiality of every letter apparent through disappearance. Here, Wolf clearly distinguishes erasure from translation, for erasure contributes to “not only what was there”—for example, separating form from content—“but also what wasn’t there.”⁶ This includes, in addition to the tangible space on the page, the necessary tools and techniques; in this case, whiting out with correction fluid. Her essay features a nerdish portrait of both Bettie Nesmith (“the godmother of all erasure artists”⁷), inventor and founder of the *Liquid Paper* brand (marketing correction fluid, correction pens, correction tape), as well as the transgressive morphing properties of white-out itself. For the print publication of *SONNE FROM ORT*,

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1. Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999, 12–16, 12.
 2. Kenneth Goldsmith, “Conceptual Poetics,” *Poetry Foundation* (June 2008), n.pag. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/06/conceptual-poetics-kenneth-goldsmith> (accessed 3 February 2018).
 3. Craig Dworkin, “The Fate of Echo,” in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011, xxiii–liv, xxxvii.
 4. Gilbert, “Book Pirates,” 60.
 5. Referring to Lucy Lippard’s post-aesthetic premises of the “dematerialization of the art object,” in Lucy Lippard, *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, New York: Praeger, 1973.
 6. Uljana Wolf, “Whiting Out,” n.pag.
 7. *Ibid.*

the erasures are visually translated by graphic designer Andreas Töpfer into typographical sequences that encode the surface of the correction fluid. For example, dotted, double, or single lines signify the different forms of brush stroke. These also resemble the scratches and tracks of birds; in other words, the migratory orientation of the found texts¹:



It stands to reason that both Gilbert and Weiner choose this iconic first line of Sonnet XLIII (“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways”²) to, firstly, illustrate the dialogic complexity of the erasure piece; secondly, to encapsulate how Hawkey inverts the love-theme in the original (undying love becomes dying love³) and Wolf undoes the pathos of Rilke’s translation,⁴ engaging the reader in an overt and substantial rereading of the original and the translation. “Making paper liquid,” then, means disrupting the conventional modes one typically associates with writing and reading poetry in translation, while at the same time stimulating the intrinsic value of the migratory text in its materiality as such, aesthetically and ethically. By exploring the collaborative logic of production, one can detect how Wolf’s and Hawkey’s erasurist rendering transfers the artistic subjectivity of Barrett Browning and Rilke to the process of refabricating materiality.⁵ In doing so, they forge a highly unique and self-referential, yet non-authen-

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1. Christian Hawkey and Uljana Wolf, *SONNE FROM ORT*, Berlin: kookbooks, 2012, 90–91. Cf. Weiner, “Friday Pick: SONNE FORM ORT,” n.pag.
 2. Barrett-Browning, *Sonette*, 90.
 3. See Weiner, “Friday Pick,” n.pag.
 4. See Gilbert, *Reprint*, 530.
 5. Carlos Spoerhase wrote an insightful article that particularly addresses the metamediality of Hawkey’s and Wolf’s erasure, referring to Starre’s definition whereby “a literary work becomes a metamedium once it uses specific devices to reflexively engage with the specific

tic and incomplete version—one could just take another copy of the book and start erasing—of Rilke’s canonical translation.

It is true that the digital networks that constitute the fabric of globalization call for a new understanding of the general process of poetry and the individual product of the poem. However, as Hito Steyerl has shown for the visual arts, the decontextualizing machines displacing people, objects, and language that neo-conceptualism celebrates “turn out to be perfectly adapted to the semioticization of capital, and thus to the conceptual turn of capitalism.”¹ In this light, it has been my interest to further a post-conceptual understanding of Wolf’s translational poetics in the conflicted context of aesthetic particularity and the deaesthetizing strategies of outright quantitative appropriation. Interestingly, on a final note, Uljana Wolf relates erasure to Walter Benjamin’s materialist theology, or, more precisely, to his term *Entstellung*.² In Benjamin’s writings, both the concept and form of *Entstellung* (distortion) and the concept and form of translation³ are linked to the central category of the messianic that permeates language and the order of the profane—and both are defamiliarizing and foreignizing techniques that Wolf uses to extend and complicate the conceptuality and contemporaneity of language and the literary work.

material medium to which it is affixed or in which it is displayed,” in Alexander Starre, *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015, 8. See Carlos Spoerhase, “Refabrikationen Rilkes: Uljana Wolfs materielle Poetik der Übertragung,” in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* (December 2017), Volume 91, Issue 4, 455–477.

1. Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2012, 42.
2. Uljana Wolf, “Whiting Out,” n.pag.
3. See, for example, Benjamin’s famous essay “The Task of the Translator” which is also central to Wolf’s essay on erasure. I will elaborate on this in another paper, the working draft of which is currently entitled “The Ethics of Experimental Translation in Contemporary German Poetry.”

Haunting Is Recursive: A brief meditation on erasure and the case of *Zong!*

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Do you believe in ghosts? The notion of spirits lingering, somehow, in our midst? Even without belief, we might recognize the haunting, the way something absent can return or linger, present but out of reach. The haunting relies on some past relation, on occurrence and recurrence.

The artist—attending to the ways we are haunted—might create a haunting. The work bringing into being ghosts by creating a space for sensing the presence that once was and is no longer. For such a ghostly creation to be recognized, the space, blank or obscured, has to exist at the site of what was. Something that has been erased, obliterated, obscured, and the perception of that something's absence, of its alteration in space is as much a part of the haunting as the perception of blankness or absence itself, as if something is and isn't at once. This is the emergence of erasure's art. To destroy or obscure the thing to create a new work of art gives attention to the what-was-before. Although this may seem obvious, it is worth some deliberation, because what is erased can also be lost, and what has not been recognized or perceived may not be available for erasure. The haunting, the ghost must persist. To erase becomes, then, a strange kind of bringing into being, where the attention is not to blank space itself but absence or some obscurity beyond recognition that the artist brings us to dwell upon. Obscurity's notable framing becomes the haunting of what was and is no longer.

Not quite a taoist recognition of fleeting, the poetic erasure rather fixes into some permanence the having-been of the erased, something we can't access yet must acknowledge, for without what was (and is no longer) the erasure does not exist at all.

I, too, am stunned by bare branches visible against the night sky. The leaves gone.

Erasure is both an act and an assertion of inquiry, a recognition of the ghost. The ghost in Jen Bervin's celebrated *Nets* provides a clear example: Shakespeare's

sonnets emerge, a recognized foundation on which the erasure is enacted. Readers see the spectre of the sonnet even as the words of the bard's original poems are largely obscured. The presence of the form and tradition informs the reading, shaping the poem and the reader's relationship to the new work, even as that form and tradition are obscured.

Repetition becomes a kind of haunting, what was returns after an absence. There needs to be a space between these returnings, recurrence only possible in the patterns created, what is and was. Repetition requires not only the coming in, the wave flowing, but also the going away, the ebb, its observance. The re- tells us it is not continuous but was gone, for an instant or for generations. Yet Shakespeare has not gone away. So we recognize the way the sonnets shape the Nets, even as they are erased.

On the pages of NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, what has been is less familiar than the ubiquitous bard. "In its erasure and forgetting of the be-ing of and humanity of the Africans on board the Zong, the legal text of Gregson v. Gilbert becomes a representation of the fugal state of amnesia, serving as a mechanism for erasure and alienation." If erasure is not paired with that recognition, that remembering, then how can we return or return to what has been obscured? Philip tells us: "This story that must be told; that can only be told by not telling." In her book created from words of legal text and imagined language of murdered Africans on the slave ship, words given and taken away, written and broken, legible and illegible, what does Philip teach us? What does the poet teach us both about what we know and what we don't know and how we might reach into that for proximity to knowledge to emerge—to call forth the haunting? Erasures that have occurred historically and are recovered—via a return in creative work that both exposes what was while laying bare what is still unavailable—draw attention to the ghosts, some erased presences we don't have access to, the erasures we are not educated enough to see, or that have been kept from or that we often ignore. Some of us more than others. Some of us more willfully than others. What has been erased historically emerges, recurs, as if reinscribed, yet the erasing itself is exposed too—the impossible-to-say is a telling and untelling. Words are given and broken apart, then their absence marked—to be erased means to have been. And even with attention to what happened, to the people, the murdered Africans aboard the slave ship the Zong, Philip insists this is a story that cannot be told. Over and over, she repeats: *the story that cannot be told*.

There are different relations to erasure a reader might identify in the book. Some historical, some the words that emerge and recede, some implicit in the imagination required to take part in the text. The legal documents that obscure the lives of the dead, wipe out their very humanity with language of "goods" and of "property," with justifications we call law, what has been legal. *Zong!* instead gives us names lost and imagined. Voices emerging before they were submerged

under the ocean in death. The imagination works against the erasure, giving the pattern of grasp and ungraspable, the pattern of the haunting that depends on the return of that loss, that story. The book gives us lost languages, unfamiliar, emerging as words we can read but not fully grasp, for the languages too have been erased. The text itself breaks apart. The words over-written, obscured by other words on these pages—the blurring is not only fade but also overlap. Ink fades. Words overlap on the page until the letters clutter into obscuring, shapes unseeable by their layering.

Erasure gives entrée into the philosophical problem of being and not being, a way to consider these as different yet overlapping ways of considering experience, knowing, world. How can we know what is not there for perception? What can we make of a story that cannot be told, “yet must be told”? Erasure in *Zong!* adds the entanglement of time, embodiment, and history. The poetic is not distinct from the philosophical but, especially where the words themselves seep out of visibility on the page, is rather a disembodied, dematerialized manifestation of what is beyond logic, argument, and here even language itself. Yet, still the ghostly quality of language is part of the poem. Language brings the unsayable to the reader. The poem is only created by what is not there. The spiritual invocation of decreation, in Simone Weil’s terminology, is apt, as “to make something created pass into the uncreated,” rather than into nothingness. The uncreated is an existence that the attentive might, indeed must, recognize.

The haunting quality of erasure is given attention in the very authorial naming of the book. *Zong!*’s book jacket reads: as told to the author by Sataey Adamu Boateng. This is “the voice of the ancestors.” M. NourbeSe Philip is not telling the story alone. It is haunted. But the attention to the ghosts is not something to fear. Rather, ignorance of them should be our relentless concern. Repeating over and over.

Water swallows bodies—we swallow objects, food. We swallow words, too, and they might disappear into us, as nourishments or poison or air. Air is nourishment, too. Water can sustain us or drown us. In song, water is “drowning” is “thirst” is perilous in Philip’s poetry. What we need kills us. It becomes murderous. Imagine looking at all that water, thirsty, and knowing all that open sea will be your death. The imagination must draw forth the very thing it does not know. Imagine being a person among people, knowing those people are murderers, they don’t recognize your humanity, are not humane, can’t even say your name, won’t hear your name?

If the reader can’t imagine the being-in of the space between, is it erasure or something else, more like absence? More like nothing? We worry over ignorance, and ignorance is this hollow space, not the thing-known-now-not-available but the never-known and never-sought. So, erasure has the impact of having-been, of recognition of loss, of frailty, of impermanence. Think again of the relationship to

the fleeting: erasure makes present what is not there. Erasure tells us to pay attention, and when it is generous, as in *Zong!*, it gives us the palimpsest or serves us some means to discover the meaning of palimpsests.

When Philip inserts the names, in tiny font at the bottom of the Os section of the book, language is given to the unheard African men, women, and children on the ship, while holding space for its hollows, keeping it at a necessary distance. The words fall under the page. To write a name and to say the people were stripped even of their names in the record, we see the layers of erasure, the palimpsest emerging. The name. The voices drowning. The ledger of anonymity. To be erased on the page leave a mark to emerge as haunting, but only when the language re-emerges. How can we be witness when what is not there is the thing to attend to? *Zong!* draws forth the names, the words, even while exposing their incompleteness, their loss, the impossibility of witnessing this absence. Words emerge from the spaces on the page, the broken words give even as they take away. Stutters are added, clarity is disrupted. Space is inserted into the language of the text, like a warning. The words are staggered. Later, the erasure is made visible as the dark print fades, the words pile on each other, impossible to read, difficult to see, drowning on the page.

Erasure is not invisibility, because erasure implies the knowing what was. Giving language to what is lost, what is “unable to be told,” exposes the absences, reminds us of what language cannot do, what logic cannot explain. What came before and what emerges and what fails to emerge are intertwined, entangled in ways that challenge the very definitions of what is possible to be seen, understood, or said. Erasure in life may be seen as a violation whereas in art it is or becomes attention to what was, what we might see or read but cannot or will not or have not. Erasure makes us read differently. The creation needs what has been erased, so it emerges.

I see an abandoned house. Do you see it? The roof sunken with age. Life had been there. Shelter only to the scattered leaves now, yet from that broken chimney unseen swirls emerge, the pot that had been on the stove boiling, the burning logs, their smoke rising.

What do we make of the object that is not, the thing we may know—if in part—but cannot see, the past we have not learned, or the memory we are not retrieving? What do we do with a history never taught? With bodies unsung, unspoken, unheard, not only unacknowledged but unknown? If the people are swallowed in silence, what are we listening for? Can the work of erasure reveal their being, their presence, their very resistance to loss? To bring forth in erasure might seem an act of creation, yet erasure cannot be an act of creation. It depends on what already exists. Yet what might be created is knowledge, haunting as a coming-back-into-knowing. A return.

Down the road, pillory on display in museum yard, a tourist attraction. Where is the suffering body? Do I see the sagging neck? Or do I know the passersby, stop-

ping to see the body, stilled? And the passersby not stopping. The judge. The man put the lock down. The man who forged the shackles. The wife down the way, her pot set to boil.

Laurine Rousselet : (in)effacer en poésie

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Laurine Rousselet a écrit de nombreux recueils de poésie : *Tambour* (2003), *Mémoire de sel* (2004), *El Respir* (2008), *De l'or Havanais* (2010), *Hasardismes* (2011), *Nuit témoin* (2016) et elle en présente deux autres en 2019 : *Barcelona* (2019) et *Ruine balance* (2019). À cela s'ajoute un essai poétique consacré au conflit Syrien : *Syrie, ce proche ailleurs* (2015).

Ses amis poètes soulignent sa prédilection pour la forme courte, brûlante où « demeurent le désir et l'arrachement, face à quelque absolu qui nous foudroie d'être à jamais inaccessible¹ ». Marcel Moreau note son énergie à « grimper aux extrémités du non-dit² » et Bernard Noël, sa capacité d'apercevoir un « ange [...] ». Passant considérable et qui pourtant s'est effacé presque aussitôt dans une envolée de mots³. »

Cette suspension des mots, entre l'absence et l'extrême présence, s'obtient en jouant avec leur poids et leur espace. Rousselet travaille les blancs et les rythmes et inscrit son texte, débarrassé du superflu, dans le plan aéré des pages. Elle semble également avoir une préférence pour la brièveté de l'aphorisme, la consistance et le goût du sel ou le battement du tambour. Et puis, elle ne cesse de mettre ses poèmes face à leur traduction : arabe, espagnole ou catalane notamment — sachant qu'elle étend cette règle à d'autres textes que les siens avec les plaquettes bilingues qu'elle édite pour *Les Cahiers de l'approche*. Enfin, elle associe aussi régulièrement ses lectures à la musique. Elle a beaucoup travaillé avec le compositeur marocain Abdelhabi El-Rarbi et développe actuellement un travail avec le percussionniste congolais Emile Biayenda.

Or, si traduire et mélanger un texte à de la musique font disparaître respectivement le français et le verbal, s'agit-il pour autant d'un effacement ? La traduc-

1. Hubert Haddad, préface à *Hasardismes*, Paris, L'Inventaire, 2011, p. 10.

2. Marcel Moreau, préface à *Mémoire de sel*, Paris, L'Inventaire, 2004, non paginé.

3. Bernard Noël, prologue à *El Respir*, Gäßes, Espagne, éditions Libres del Segle, 2008, p. 12.

tion et la musique réécrivent et sur-écrivent le texte. Elles le défigurent et en redéfinissent les frontières linguistiques et sonores. Mais elles contribuent aussi, en profondeur, à la recherche de Rousselet pour donner aux mots plus de force et prolonger un texte en un « projet » de poésie organique, inachevable et sonore.

L'étude de cet (in)effacement — pour reprendre une expression chère à Michel Deguy — de la poésie dans d'autres œuvres et dans d'autre media s'appuiera sur un ensemble de textes volontairement associés par l'auteur à d'autres langues et à d'autres sons : *Mémoire de sel*, *Journal de l'attente* et *El respir*, mais aussi sur son récit produit en résidence à Cuba : *De l'or havanais* (2010). Ceci permettra de décrire un effacement qui n'est ni détournement, ni défiguration mais ouverture de l'espace poétique au cumul et à l'échange, de pays à pays, d'artiste à artiste et d'œuvre à œuvre. Il s'agira aussi de révéler la musique et la traduction dans leur puissance de métamorphose et leur capacité à faire de l'absence en poésie, une forme de lien entre désir et mémoire.

Passage par la traduction

Le recueil *Mémoire de sel* répartit ses poèmes en trois chapitres intitulés (dans l'ordre) « L'exil », « Dieu sans merci » et « Méditerranée la nomade » et il met ses poèmes en regard de leur traduction arabe. L'ensemble projette la poésie vers un là-bas méditerranéen avec des mots qui avancent, par à-coups, vers un extrême situé dans un autre espace — quasi inaccessible et dont on ne revient pas :

Mystère de l'absence
grande ouverte à l'échine
née
de nulle part
et
sans retour
qui ne peut se remonter¹

Cet extrême mystérieux que décrivent ici les vers courts et irréguliers, c'est l'« *autre langue*² » (ici l'arabe) que Rousselet écrit, en italique, dès le premier poème du recueil et qu'elle fait imprimer en face de chaque texte. Chaque double-page introduit de fait, une alternance entre le connu et l'inconnu : entre le français et ce qui lui apparaît comme un ensemble de « *sons au cordage illisible*³ ». Avec le bilinguisme s'instaure un jeu de miroir et une confrontation entre deux sens de lecture, deux cultures et deux espaces géographiques très différents.

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1. Laurine Rousselet, *Mémoire de sel*, Paris, l'Inventaire, 2004, non paginé, poème IV – noté MDS en notes.
 2. MDS, Poème I.
 3. MDS, Poème I.

Par ailleurs, huit poèmes du *Journal de l'attente* ont également été choisis pour une édition bilingue (français-arabe) aux *cahiers de l'approche* — cahiers que Rousselet a co-fondé en 2011 avec Erwann Rougé et qu'elle édite seule depuis 2017. La publication de ces plaquettes permet aux textes d'embrasser une altérité au-delà des frontières. Elle introduit aussi un souci d'assimiler la rencontre de l'autre langue avec la naissance d'un enfant. L'écriture devient en effet comme un arabe et un nouveau-né, homme ou femme, bleu ou rose, qui frappe et crie pour « perdre », « faire du vide », « ouvrir » écrit Rousselet dans le quatrième poème de la série, pour s'épanouir, respirer, venir.

écrire n'est-il pas toujours étranger à soi?
fondre dans les trous de l'œil
pour faire du vide
le poumon de la vision

perdre n'est pas rose
perdre n'est pas bleu
perdre c'est s'affaler dans la mort
pour la braquer

la vie a dans sa lumière un rêve premier
le bassin frappe de cris
puis s'ouvre
le corps provoquant la bataille du souffle

désirer écoute
quelque chose vient vers toi

En fait, la traduction-enfant raconte un effacement, mais c'est un effacement qui « braque la mort » en produisant le contraire d'une disparition. Le même processus émerge d'ailleurs dans l'édition bilingue — français-catalan — de *El respir* où le poème consacré à l'« ange défunt » — aussi appelé « ange de Sel » — s'affirme dans sa capacité à « devenir », en se laissant « prendre » puis « pend[re] au sein des bassins de couches » pour « retrouver sur l'heure / et / hors visage le sens des yeux¹ ». Ici, la corrosivité du sel produit une « encre sans jetée² » qui s'envole et disparaît dans l'altérité de mots écrits et traduits. De page en page, le texte semble vouloir à la fois ancrer, redoubler et effacer une voix qui renaît de plus belle, en prenant de nouvelles voies.

En sentinelle
est assailli
dans ta bouche de royaume
par des millions de voix
sous stèle

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1. *El Respir*, p. 18-20.
 2. *El Respir*, p. 20.

ton vœu de Silence
au secret de Salut¹

Entre « source² » et « suicide³ », le poème avance et recule face à l'altérité que représentent l'enfant, le mot et l'autre langue. Et la traduction ne fait qu'accen-tuer — par l'excès de mots — ce processus qui consiste à faire du lien défait un nouveau lien. Il s'agit de travailler à entrer :

Dans le ventre du vivre éventé
Par la force des fers⁴

La traduction arabe, si diamétralement opposée au texte français, s'introduit en effet comme un corps étranger entre chaque poème. De même, le catalan ou l'espagnol perturbent la continuité du texte en imposant brutalement un nouvel espace à la lecture. Les langues étrangères coupent la parole de celui ou de celle qui lit sans pouvoir les déchiffrer. Il se forme alors ce « tombeau de lèvres⁵ » sur lequel « se battent de naître⁶ » de nouveaux mots et un nouveau corps. Quant au lecteur qui sait déchiffrer « l'autre écriture », il prend toujours le risque d'un contresens. Et toute lecture à haute voix introduit la possibilité d'un *sibole⁷* discriminant en lieu et place de *schibboleth* — mot de passe imprononçable (et intraduisible) que les hommes de Jephthé utilisent pour identifier et tuer d'autres hébreux qui n'ont pas le même accent. Ce mot signifie fleuve, rivière, épi de blé, ou ramille d'olivier, mais son sens — plutôt orienté vers le passage et l'échange — est contredit par le récit puisque ce qui compte c'est qu'il révèle une différence et conduise au massacre (42000 hommes selon l'épisode de la Bible⁸). Dans le célèbre poème qu'il consacre à ce mot, Paul Celan marque la fermeture induite par ce seul mot lorsqu'il passe du côté du dire — ou plutôt du « crire » pour parler comme Rousselet à propos de sa recherche de l'« inouï⁹ ».

gib dich auch hier zu erkennen,
hier, in der Mitte des Marktes.
Rufs, das Schibboleth, hinaus
in die Fremde der Heimat:
Februar. No pasarán.

là aussi fais-toi connaître,
là au milieu du marché.
Crie-le, le schibboleth, à toute force
dans l'étrangeté du pays:
février. *No pasarán*¹⁰.

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1. *El Respir*, p. 24.
 2. *El Respir*, p. 22.
 3. *El Respir*, p. 24.
 4. *El Respir*, p. 28.
 5. *El Respir*, p. 28.
 6. *El Respir*, p. 30.
 7. Misprononciation possible de *schibboleth*.
 8. Les Juges, chap. 12, v. 5 et 6.
 9. Marcel Moreau, préface de *MDS*, *op. cit.*, non paginé.
 10. Paul Celan, « Schibboleth », dans *Le Méridien & autres proses*, Paris, Seuil, édition bilingue, traduit de l'allemand et annoté par Jean Launay, 2002.

Derrida¹ s'est lui aussi saisi de ce mot fatidique — en hommage à Paul Celan — pour discuter du langage comme signe d'appartenance et support de discrimination.

À cause de la « valeur différentielle » d'un mot imprononçable, le secret de l'appartenance à l'autre communauté ne peut rester caché. L'altérité est aussi audible qu'est visible la couleur de la peau².

Rousselet sait bien qu'un lecteur français aura beaucoup de difficultés à prononcer l'arabe sans accroc — et inversement — même celui qui parle et lit la langue couramment. Or mal prononcer, comme l'indique Derrida dans son texte *Schibboleth, pour Paul Celan*, c'est prendre le risque d'une exclusion allant parfois jusqu'à la disparition. Derrida mets en effet l'accent sur « les ravages d'une norme qui agit comme la négation absolue de l'altérité et qui, à force d'oppression, fait exploser l'humanité en tribus hostiles³ ». Rousselet, elle, laisse à son lecteur la liberté de dire ou de ne pas dire et elle ne l'oblige jamais à comprendre. Elle respecte en cela ce droit à l'opacité qu'Édouard Glissant⁴ oppose à la pensée universaliste qui tend à écraser la diversité. Son lecteur est juste mis face à une altérité qui peut lui rester inconnue. Le choix de juxtaposer des langues permet seulement de rappeler que la menace d'effacement existe.

Mais ce choix, susceptible de réduire le lecteur au silence signale aussi, à l'opposé, que les langues sont loin d'être étrangères les unes aux autres. C'est ce que dit notamment Walter Benjamin dans un texte de 1921 : *La Tâche du traducteur*. Il y avance en effet que les langues étrangères « s'excluent, mais à un autre niveau, s'additionnent, se “complètent mutuellement”⁵ » pour produire cette « pure langue » (*die reine Sprache*) capable de rassembler tous les « vouloir dire » de toutes les langues. Les nombreuses analyses de ce texte montrent en effet que pour Benjamin, traduire consiste à « résoudre » à « reconstituer » le « grand vase brisé de la pure langue⁶ ». Aussi, vu sous cet angle, le multilinguisme de Rousselet travaille-t-il à identifier la langue à un espace d'accueil. Il rappelle en effet que les langues sont toutes apparentées et que la traduction — à la fois reproduction, trahison et déformation — est un paradigme de l'hospitalité conçue comme hostipitalité. Derrida qui est à l'origine de ce néologisme, s'appuie sur l'étymologie qui définit l'*hostis* à la fois comme l'hôte (invité et invitant) et l'ennemi qui

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1. Jacques Derrida, *Schibboleth : pour Paul Celan* (conférence de Seattle, 1984).
 2. Christine Hemmelig, « Schibboleth, pour une lecture politique et philosophique du symbole », dans *Critica Masonica*, n°6, volume 3, n° 2, juin 2015.
 3. Christine Hemmelig, *op. cit.*
 4. Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Gallimard, 1997.
 5. Robert Maggiori, « La pure langue décryptée. Traductologie. Quand Antoine Berman étudie Walter Benjamin », dans *Libération*, 22 jan. 2009 – en ligne.
 6. *Ibidem.*

envahit¹. Ici apparaît la violence feutrée d'une confrontation à l'autre, entre accueil et fantasme de dépossession.

Benjamin rappelle que la « traductibilité » qui permet à des langues très différentes de se rejoindre s'applique à toutes les langues². Cette qualité tient, selon lui, au fait que « Dieu a créé le monde avec le Verbe, mais silencieusement, dans le langage des choses [...]. Il revient à l'homme d'accueillir dans le nom ce qui est sans nom³ » ou pour le dire autrement, il lui revient d'imiter le Verbe créateur en traduisant, sachant que chaque traduction (imparfaite) introduit des métamorphoses, ajoute de nouvelles connaissances et appelle toujours de nouvelles traductions. La traduction serait en fait une figure du potentiel créatif de la rencontre avec l'étranger et pour le dire autrement, une forme de langage qui introduit l'espace inaudible de la langue « pure » : cet espace plein de toutes les langues et paradoxalement silencieux.

Passage par le silence

L'espace où se rassemble les langues apparaît dans l'entre-deux plus ou moins large qui sépare les textes et que coupe la reliure. Cet espace est la fois une barrière et une ouverture. C'est le lieu où le papier se plie et disparaît tout en annonçant de nouvelles pages : c'est l'espace où se révèle l'épaisseur d'un texte qui s'ouvre et s'efface dans une traduction. Cet entre-deux introduit une respiration silencieuse riche de nombreux possibles. Il fait glisser le lecteur vers un vide productif et dynamique qui d'ailleurs commence souvent déjà dans le texte. Les signes très légers des extraits du *Journal de l'attente* pour *Les Cahiers de l'approche*, se mêlent intimement à l'énergie sonore et visuelle du blanc. Parfois, dans *Tambour* notamment, le blanc s'introduit même entre les mots et efface des morceaux de phrases. Chaque coupe permet alors, comme la traduction, de s'approprier un nouvel espace : celui qui entoure les textes — non pas hors texte, mais support du texte non-dit ou des autres manières de dire.

Vie
sur l' aveugle
 asphalte fardé
 — *hors limite du jour vivant*
des serrements blancs
Vie
Respire⁴

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1. Gerasimos Kakoliris, « Jacques Derrida on the ethics of hospitality », dans *The Ethics of subjectivity. Perspectives since the dawn of Modernity*, dir. Elvis Imafidon, éd. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 149.
 2. Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres I*, Paris, Folio-Gallimard, 2000, p. 157.
 3. *Ibidem*.
 4. Laurine Rousselet, *El Respir*, p. 44 et *Tambour*, « La Ville » (non paginé).

Le blanc met en fait une infinité de signes à l'intérieur du texte et donne à l'effacement valeur de parole. Vu sous cet angle, l'effacement ne produit pas du manque. Il présente le silence comme la condition même de l'existence des mots ou, pour le dire autrement, reproduit ce support immatériel à la fois vide et saturé d'information qui, selon Anne-Marie Christin dans son ouvrage sur la poétique du blanc¹ a justement donné naissance aux idéogrammes chinois². Les idéogrammes sont en effet, selon Christin, des miroirs cartographiques du ciel étoilé, le ciel étant vu comme « espace matériel et lieu virtuel de tensions génératrices de sens [...] introduisant l'invisible dans l'univers humain du visible [...] [et] annon[çant] la mutation de l'image en support d'une écriture³ ». Avec l'étoilement réapparaît la « mémoire blanche » qui depuis l'antiquité relie l'écriture, tout autant à la mémoire visuelle qu'à la mémoire orale et identifie le langage à un objet universel : la fois propre et commun.

Cette logique du blanc a été inaugurée par le *Coup de dés* de Mallarmé. Elle produit des textes qui s'appuient sur l'activité du regard et montre que, finalement, une langue ne se possède pas. Inaudible et intouchable, elle appartient à un lieu où les signes se rejoignent et où les mots changent de sens, se transforment, de génération en génération. Ce lieu est autant celui de Rousselet que celui des autres : il permet au langage de survivre. D'où souvent la référence à l'enfant — enfant-blanc et enfant de chair, sa fille.

Il est clair que les premiers jours, j'étais dans l'air l'espace même. Il n'y avait ni départ, ni refonte, ni voyelle, ni point. Sur le plateau de mon rêve, *Amaliamour*, à sang et à cris, est née. Rien d'autre qu'une plongée dans le néant⁴.

Cet enfant est rejoint plus tard par un fils : « L'enfant garçon qui court / Elias vaisseau lune⁵ » Il permet au poème d'atteindre un autre monde : coupés du « corset » du sens mais rempli de la qualité sonore et rythmée du silence : ces « rires d'oubli ».

C'est l'automne maman dit Amalia
des feuilles distantes du ciel répondent

bleue la couleur de l'arche
nous partons deux à la mer⁶

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1. Anne-Marie Christin, *Poétique du blanc – Vide et intervalle dans la civilisation de l'alphabet*, Vrin, p. 11.
 2. Anne-Marie Christin, chapitre 3 p. 42 ; sur les devins chinois qui transcrivaient les figures célestes et les notaient sur des carapaces de tortues.
 3. Anne-Marie Christin, « Espace et mémoire : les leçons de l'idéogramme », dans *Protée*, Volume 32, Numéro 2, « L'archivage numérique : conditions, enjeux, effets », automne 2004, p. 19–28. Consulté en ligne sur *Erudit*, le 18 février 2018.
 4. Laurine Rousselet, *De l'or havanais*, op. cit., p. 25.
 5. Laurine Rousselet, *Nuit Témoins*, Isabelle Sauvage, 2016, p. 101.
 6. *Journal de l'attente* (extraits), poème 8.

Rousselet embarque en fait vers le bruit blanc : à la fois absence et nappe sonore. Sorte d'ailleurs au principe germinatif qui porte le texte en lui ou, pour le dire autrement, son inaugural — comme le cri du nouveau-né — qui distribue le souffle, implique un certain dire et structure le texte.

J'étais à La Casona. Ces régions, aussi secrètes que mortes, ont tracé instantanément, par la force du langage, des signes chargés de réalité : un monde perdu, qui porte sa trace, par le travail du corps. Dans une précipitation hors pair, je me mis à voir flou et, la main sur la bouche, je m'entendis balbutier « ce n'est pas vrai ». J'associe cet îlot d'enfantement à une parole nouvelle : une concrétion des sens opérant dans les sous-sols du corps. Je me mis à écrire attablée¹.

Cet extrait de *De l'or havanais* décrit justement un de ces lieux « secrets », « morts », « perdus » d'où naît une écriture avec laquelle s'instaurent, comme avec un enfant, un contrat singulier, une alliance dissymétrique, qui renvoie à la fameuse *différance* derridienne. Pour Derrida, ce néologisme désigne en effet une limite qui met en relation l'œuvre et son dehors.

La limite derridienne n'est pas situable dans l'espace, ou si elle l'est, c'est seulement de manière oblique, un mot qui ne renvoie pas à une disposition, mais à une tension, une dissymétrie. [...] Dans cet espace métaphorique ou les mots transportent, font dériver ou déraiper, la différence qui produit des chaînes dans le langage est *inarrêtable*. Elle travaille toujours à défaire ce qu'elle tisse².

De cette « différence » surgissent le silence et l'effondrement du langage, mais aussi les collisions, les perforations, les traces, les connexions qui produisent les mots, les langues, la philosophie et les livres. La « différence » donne au poème sa force et sa vulnérabilité — tout déterritorialisé qu'il est dans un monde marqué par l'incertain, la mer, le bruit. En résidence à Cuba, Rousselet écrit :

Je m'étonne sans fin, dans ces moments « introductibles », de ne me sentir ni femme ni homme, ni jeune, mais déchirée de mon enveloppe culturelle. Je poursuis. L'expérience vécue n'immobilise rien. Maçonner des constructions mentales qui s'écroulent naturellement sur l'air d'une musique adoubee par le vent pour voir fleurir; voilà le jeu de l'harmonie³.

D'effacements en écroulements, Rousselet ne cesse pourtant d'avancer parce que « rien ne supprime l'envol qui cherche à rassembler⁴ ». Et se souvenant du parcours de Reinaldo Arenas, « ce splendide agité du réel⁵ », toujours soutenu par

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1. Laurine Rousselet, *De l'or havanais*, éditions Apogée, 2010, p. 9.
 2. Pierre Delain, *Le Concept d'œuvre de Jacques Derrida, un vaccin contre la loi du pire*, Thèse de doctorat de l'Université de recherche Paris Sciences et Lettres PSL Research University, dir. Marc Crépon, soutenue le 7 janvier 2017, p. 139.
 3. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 10.
 4. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 14.
 5. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 11.

l'énergie des mots dans sa navigation vers le cri, l'exil, la mort, elle s'ouvre elle aussi au non-dit et à l'autre langue : celle qui vient en arabe, en espagnol ou en musique, cette forme — sonore — du silence d'où émerge la parole. La musique introduit en effet une autre « différence ». Comme les enfants, elle n'est pas une origine mais un « bouleversement¹ » : un nouvel événement imprévisible, sensuel et excessif du texte. Comme les enfants elle produit une nouvelle énigme, un délai. L'accès à soi s'y trouve différé. Elle libère une voix où s'exprime l'urgence combinée de rencontrer l'inconnu et de donner la vie.

Passage par la musique

Ce rapport à la musique existe depuis longtemps pour Rousselet et il se matérialise par des collaborations avec des musiciens. Elle a développé notamment plusieurs projets avec le compositeur et multi-instrumentiste marocain Abdelhadi El Rharbi. Dès 2001 en effet, elle associe sa voix à l'oud pour une lecture de « La Vague » (*Tambour*). En 2002, elle se produit, toujours avec El Rharbi, sur le podium du marché de la poésie. En 2005, au centre d'art et de littérature de L'Échelle (Ardennes), ils ajoutent à leur duo la flûte traversière d'Eugénie Kuffler. Le violoncelle revient aussi dans un enregistrement autour de la série des *Hasardismes*. Et elle a commencé plus récemment un travail de recherche avec le percussionniste congolais Emile Biayenda.

Parfois le texte est interprété par un comédien : Denis Lavant par exemple, propose une vibrante interprétation le poème-fleuve *Crisálida*². De même, c'est la comédienne Anouck Grinberg qui donne sa voix aux poèmes de Rousselet pour l'émission de France Culture produite par El Rharbi et Irène Omélianenko : *Laurine Rousselet : l'effractionnaire* (2013)³.

El Rharbi et Biayenda indiquent, tous les deux, avoir été marqués sur la charge rythmique mise par Rousselet lorsqu'elle lit elle-même ses textes. Emile Biayenda retient une phraséologie à la fois puissante, brute et tranchante et il dit vouloir « offrir un canal pour permettre à cette parole de s'exprimer librement⁴ ». El Rharbi insiste sur son plaisir à retrouver ses propres recherches dans la sensibilité très musicale et l'oralité « non-jouée » de Rousselet. Il parle d'un lien « instinctif » avec la musique qui leur évite d'avoir besoin d'expliquer pourquoi un poème se prête plus à un traitement musical qu'un autre et pourquoi introduire

1. *De l'or havanais*, op. cit., p. 27.

2. *Crisálida* dit par Denis Lavant, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZoBnyF7Tok&t=6s>.

3. Irène Omélianenko « Rousselet l'effractionnaire », dans L'Atelier de la création, *France Culture*, 18/06/2013 <http://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/latelier-de-la-creation-14-15/laurine-rousselet-leffractionnaire> [consulté le 13 octobre 2017].

4. Entretien de G. Guetemme avec E. Biayenda, 23/01/2018 (non publié).

telle ou telle « variation à l'intérieur de la voix [dit-il] pour briser la monotonie qui pourrait s'installer dans la lecture¹ ».

Ma rencontre avec Laurine Rousselet remonte à une dizaine d'années. Ma musique a spontanément rencontré ses poèmes. J'y retrouve certaines formes de mes racines rythmiques et mélodiques, un souffle et des pulsations proches de ma culture méditerranéenne. La liberté frondeuse de la musique orientale trouve un écho naturel dans la liberté sans filet de sa poésie².

Cette liberté les relie paradoxalement dans un même éclatement. Elle leur permet de se contrarier et de partiellement s'effacer pour se refonder à partir d'un nouveau centre qui devient leur propre idiome et leur « traduction » de l'étranger qui s'impose à eux. El Rharbi parle de « fusion » à l'origine d'ambiances sonores nouvelles : « Je ne joue pas de la même façon lorsque je joue pour moi : j'intègre naturellement sa diction³. » Il avoue en fait avoir trouvé un besoin de rencontre musicale chez Rousselet dès le début de leur collaboration — ce besoin faisant d'ailleurs écho à sa propre affinité avec la poésie, très présente dans sa tradition familiale⁴. C'est sans doute pour cela que Rousselet laisse toute l'initiative à El Rharbi pour l'émission qu'ils réalisent ensemble pour *France-Culture*.

C'est lui et la réalisatrice qui ont monté l'émission. Abdelhadi est si proche de moi que lorsque j'écoute cette émission, je me dis que l'ambiance sonore correspond complètement à l'étrangeté que j'ai d'être au monde. C'est très étrange comme sensation. Très profond⁵.

Leur idiome singulier s'appuie sur le rythme d'une déclamation intense et sur les timbres de la voix et des instruments. El Rharbi insiste sur la musicalité très singulière de la voix de Rousselet qui, n'étant pas comédienne, « ne joue pas ses textes⁶ ». Ensemble, ils produisent un « entre-deux » du dire qui s'émancipe du verbal sans vraiment correspondre à un genre musical donné. El Rharbi note en effet des passages par le jazz, la musique traditionnelle et la musique classique du fait des liens entre l'oud et le théorbe, mais il ne cesse d'en sortir, en faisant contact avec cette autre sphère culturelle qu'est la poésie française contemporaine.

Et ce départ réciproque vers un ailleurs se produit aussi avec Biayenda. Contrairement à El Rharbi, leur travail n'en est qu'à ses débuts, mais il s'agit bien d'ouvrir le poème à une nouvelle respiration et de mélanger les percussions à

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1. Entretien de G. Guetemme avec A. El Rharbi, 23/01/2018 (non publié).
 2. El Rharbi, dans « Rousselet l'effractionnaire », *op. cit.*
 3. Entretien avec A. El Rharbi, *op. cit.*
 4. Pour El Rharbi, la poésie fait partie de la tradition familiale. Il s'est très tôt plié au jeu de l'improvisation musicale pour accompagner les lectures de son cousin poète.
 5. Entretien — Angoulême, 2 février 2017 — non publié.
 6. Entretien avec A. El Rharbi, *op. cit.*

d'autres sons, de trouver d'autres façons de jouer. Biayenda fait à ce propos un parallèle avec la langue Kisoundi (un des dialectes de la langue Kongo) : cette langue « à double tranchant¹ » où les mots changent de sens selon leur contexte et qu'il faut toujours analyser en termes d'interactions et de développements possibles. Comme le poète malien Amadou Hampate Bâ qui fait l'éloge du Caméroun, Biayenda dit chercher — entre tolérance et souci de préservation — à adapter sa langue et sa musique au nouvel espace que lui propose Rousselet. Pour cela, il prélève les éléments les plus importants et tisse de nouveaux enchaînements qui lui appartiennent tout en respectant le ressenti d'une voix « étrangère » qu'il sent fragile et ne veut pas briser.

Entre contraste et écho, la musique de Biayenda et El Rharbi se combine au poème et projette le texte au cœur d'une multiplicité et d'une profondeur de langues que Rousselet dit elle-même ressentir — comme l'espagnol notamment — « ancrées dans son corps² ». En fait, cette ouverture à l'autre semble surtout l'aider à faire émerger sa propre présence au monde, sous la forme d'une présence modifiée, génératrice d'une nouvelle « différence ». De là surgit, écrit-elle, un langage qui

me sourit [et qui] [...] consent à faire de ma conscience un besoin de musique où les mots s'immolent dans la fièvre. Je suis menacée de vie au plus haut point. Au fond d'un creux, j'entends des croches et des doubles qui tentent d'esquiver une fin. J'essaie de ne pas m'épuiser en vain, mais respirer la disparition nourrit mes muscles³.

Les mots et la musique viennent ensemble pour produire une sorte d'effacement nourrissant, seul capable de maintenir l'énergie du texte. Cette posture lui permet aussi, d'une certaine manière, de rejoindre ces auteurs sur lesquels elle travaille : Max Aub, César Moro, Antonin Artaud, Serge Pey, Marcel Moreau, Suzanne Césaire ou Léon Gontran-Damas... Toujours en résistance lui a fait remarquer Bernard Noël. Ce sont des auteurs dont l'œuvre cherche en effet avant tout à traduire ce qui résiste, ce qui reste impossible à transposer et impossible à dire. De là sans doute aussi son souci de toujours laisser une partie de l'original intact.

Ici, la circulation des jours abonde dans le sens de la terrible absurdité. La langue étrangère, à fond dans le corps, endiable surtout ma mauvaise compréhension du « français » ! Elle me tenaille jusque dans ses profondeurs, et me berce en pensant que je me suis entichée d'elle parce que je ne la comprends pas. Oui, flotter dans le rythme de l'autre annule l'écoute de s'imaginer en présence de ses origines. [...] Je lis et relis en espagnol *Jeu et théorie du Duende* de

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1. Entretien avec E. Biayenda, *op. cit.*
 2. Entretien — Angoulême, 2 février 2017 — non publié.
 3. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 37.

Federico Garcia Lorca. Et mon esprit soupçonne de nouvelles intentions à raconter un désir de dépouilles. Je m'empêche à l'excès, de ne pas me sentir dévastée par l'inédit. Ah, si partout la langue dépassait la connaissance, la jouissance entraînerait l'effusion du défi, à rebours ou après célébration des noces¹.

Le maintien d'une partie de sa langue, en face de l'autre langue disperse et délocalise son écriture. Il lui rappelle, pour parler comme Derrida à propos de Celan que « le poème ne dévoile un secret que pour confirmer qu'il y a là du secret² ». L'échappée vers l'Afrique du Nord, l'Afrique noire, les Caraïbes n'empêche pas en effet que toujours reste la stupeur face à l'enfant et au poème qui naît : « Mon incompréhension, la plus certaine, d'avoir déployé ton cri³ ».

Entre éloignement et contamination, Rousselet travaille les limites du texte, de la langue, de la culture et du corps. Elle accepte l'effacement des versions françaises de certains articles, traduits en espagnol, publiés dans *Archipelago*, récupérés par une revue en ligne brésilienne et dont elle avoue ne plus avoir de trace : « Oui, donc je n'ai plus trace de mes versions en français. J'aime que mon travail soit ailleurs, au loin⁴. » En fait, cet effacement, loin de produire un hors-texte, révèle un espace sans frontière, capable de traduire l'intraduisible en contenant à la fois tous les lieux et aucun lieu. Jamais de l'ordre du « ni-ni », cet espace fonctionne plutôt comme un « et-et », capable d'amplifier la musique qui vient de loin et l'incertain que promet l'altérité.

Le poème parle, même si aucune référence n'y était intelligible, aucune autre que l'Autre, celui auquel il s'adresse et à qui il parle en disant qu'il lui parle. Même s'il n'atteint pas l'Autre, du moins l'appelle-t-il. L'adresse a lieu⁵.

Son attachement à l'autre lui permet de réaffirmer une présence immédiate et charnelle de soi. En effet, sa poésie est ici une poésie adressée. Elle ne cesse de rappeler le « je » qui parle et qui, tout en s'éloignant des espaces et des langues connues, s'ancre dans la vie et la présence.

Ineffacement pour que « l'effacement soit ma façon de resplendir⁶ »

L'œuvre poétique de Rousselet place la présence dans un lieu réel palpable, mais parfois distant et profondément précaire. Et de cette opposition présence/absence surgit une forme d'être particulière, écrite, mais toujours contestée, *désécrite*. En fait, la présence devient une conquête, un incessant mouvement

1. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 19.

2. Derrida, *Schiboleth, op. cit.*

3. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 16.

4. Entretien — Angoulême, 2 février 2017 — non publié.

5. Derrida, *Schiboleth, op. cit.*

6. Jaccottet, « Que la fin nous illumine », dans *Poésie 1946-1967*, Paris, Poésie/Gallimard, 1998, p. 76.

d'éclosion qui, selon Michael Brophy — reprenant Bernard Noël — est le propre de la poétique du désir.

Après tout, « fin » rejoint « faim » par le biais de l'homophonie, et comme l'a bien noté Bernard Noël dans son étude de l'art occidental, le désir, qui se signale à la fois par son épuisement inévitable et son interminable résurrection, est ce flux pulsionnel que canalisent et intensifient la gestuelle et les formes de la peinture¹.

Michel Deguy parle, lui, d'« ineffacement » pour décrire cette inlassable recherche de la présence comme renversement actif d'un processus d'oubli et d'oblitération. Pour lui, la tâche de la poésie consiste à :

faire la vérité sur ce qui (se) passe ou (s)'est passé, et qui concerne non seulement le disparu, mais le non-paru et l'inapparaissant, ce qui n'a pas de visage, pas de face et qu'il faut trouver à figurer, à appeler dans le domaine du non-visible pour pouvoir justement y faire face².

Il s'agit pour cet auteur de se poser en tension entre soustraction et addition — sans diminuer leur antagonisme intrinsèque — et, ce faisant, de se placer au cœur d'un cheminement créateur capable de contrer le « fléau de la logique identitaire, unilatérale et univoque³ ». Mais d'un point de vue ontologique, il s'agit aussi de « déjouer la fatalité de la fin et du même coup, remettre en valeur les fins de toute mise en œuvre⁴ ». Tout cela passe, selon lui, par un jeu de surcharges et de repentirs pour ressaisir un corps en effaçant, ineffaçant et re-façant. Le glissement des termes rappelle, comme l'écrit Rousselet, que « la vie débraillée se déplace à pas d'oublis vers l'oubli⁵ », mais que « l'absence est le foyer de la folie. Toutes les formes de manifestation fondamentale y sont attisées. Je saute⁶ ». Pour Deguy, rechercher la présence est un moyen de s'approcher de la vérité, Rousselet, elle, semble préférer la liberté.

La tâche qui me revient est de porter la liberté. Parce que je suis en recherche, je m'évanouis de plénitude en elle. La tragédie est de croire à l'enterrement des tensions qui nous poussent⁷.

Dotée d'une indéniable vitalité, elle presse son fort sentiment de présence sur le bord du négatif et vers le vide où le destin humain voudrait l'effacer.

Je dois m'y résoudre. Je suis en parfaite santé. Sur la pente, je fais des bonds. À qui me dit que la vie ne tisonne pas, je réponds par la fouille au corps

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1. Michael Brophy, « Introduction », dans *Ineffacer. L'œuvre et ses fins*, Paris, Hermann, 2015.
 2. Michael Brophy, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
 3. Michael Brophy, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
 4. Michael Brophy, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
 5. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 48.
 6. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 23.
 7. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 76.

et ses implantations dont me charge l'existence. [...] La maison s'écroule (je n'en ai jamais eu. Suis toujours « hébergée à titre gratuit »). Lieu du désastre ou du « désaxe », j'aborde toujours l'espace comme un lieu à fuir. J'ai pris l'avion pour venir. Je rêve de prendre la mer par bateau¹.

Et face à l'en aller irrévocable, elle propose une expérience de l'être qui cherche la lumière jusque dans l'ombre même de l'absence.

Dans le corps, l'infini pompe à la source. Certains jours, j'ai l'impression d'être un vide énorme. Un souffle gorgé du cumul de multiples vies antérieures où mes cellules, sous dictée, hallucinent le travail à être. J'avoue que « ça » dévisse ma maigreur. Et si je travaille à l'ailleurs, comme d'autres choisissent l'accessible, c'est que je suis absolument dans la vie ou en avant, mais sortie du miroir².

Ce travail de renaissance passe par une prise de risque : celle de la défiguration et celle de l'éclatement du corps — un corps de « mille et un organes. Pleinement, le corps lâche des sons et des mouvements que longtemps le jour en soi verra monter³ ». Le poème naît de ce corps.

La naissance est à la surface du poème le travail de ma préoccupation entière : l'intensité d'être doit dominer le temps⁴.

Mais du poème naît un autre corps fait de mots, de musiques et de langues. Ce corps permet à Rousselet de ne pas figer l'insaisissable et de continuer à ouvrir des brèches sur l'inconnu. Il ne résout pas l'énigme, mais travaille à penser, en suivant le conseil de Michel Deguy, « les fins de l'art [...] [comme ce qui nous conduit] à la méditation endurente de la question de la fin elle-même⁵ ». Pour Deguy, cette pensée passe par la re-montrance du corps et des mots : « un retour en forme de boucle et qui ne revient pas au point quitté⁶ », un mouvement entre affaiblissement, sauvegarde, accentuation et creusement, un reste qui s'affirme dans la négation du contenu. Mais si pour lui ce reste est un *peu-de*⁷, Rousselet qui n'a pas le même âge, ne se contente pas de ce peu. Elle écrit en effet : « Et c'est bien connu, à force d'effacement, la santé me gagne⁸. » Elle se sent « partie pour créer la vie⁹ ». En fait, son ineffacement lui permet d'être au monde avec passion.

1. *De l'or havanais*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

2. *De l'or havanais*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

3. *De l'or havanais*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

4. *De l'or havanais*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

5. Michel Deguy, *Réouverture après travaux*, Paris, Galilée, 2007, p. 241.

6. Entretien avec Michel Deguy à Dublin, par Christopher Elson, dans *Ineffacer. L'œuvre et ses fins*, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

7. Entretien avec Michel Deguy à Dublin, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

8. *De l'or havanais*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

9. *De l'or havanais*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

Il lui permet de se mettre en mouvement vite et fort. Il la noue à la vie en lui permettant « d'en sortir souvent. Le geste se nomme le poème¹ ».

Ce poème la rend « capable de frapper fort² ». Il la conduit à affronter sa finitude en prenant le risque du rapport à l'autre. Il lui permet de ne pas avoir peur.

1. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 79.

2. *De l'or havanais, op. cit.*, p. 56.

Parole aux poètes

John M. Bennett

Erasures Recycled

hack it off

page of corn que me he comido
,lustros ha ; *oh consolante horreur !*
)*Chaussepierre*(my face mask's sw
irling hair's the stream your voice was th
ick THOUGHT THE THOUGHTLESS
TEETH and gravel ; *la bouche ouverte,*
, , , ,)*Chaussepierre*("I twisted
back my eyes" your naked saw ,chain of
mice crosses room gets lost in the hall
)page of storm(! , ; *dans la*
coupe)*Chaussepierre*(alguna cosita no vista
ví ,la ventan a bierta un fue fuego fué o
aalaa page of form tongue climbs the wall
que conozco que no he conocido thum
b rain pounds my greasy specs my
hand's cut off ,g rasping *a a i i r r*

, , *les entrailles* , ?*rien*
- *Charles-Georges Coqueley de Chaussepierre*

flood sleep

yr word slime faucet . un
morne silence , ,
)*Chaussepierre*(empapados los
 huesos real istas MY PLANAR
 THOUGHT h ands in the st ream a
 cow g lands on the bank steam sw
 irls round her mouth mas ticante
 la parole , *baigné dans son*
sang , , “don’t forget the
 eggs” .yr my her ash mistake ,fire
 crawled be neath the bed your
 lake of d rains p lugged up yr SLUR
 RED TIME LOST was ! , ,
 , , , between the commas
 ; () , ? a sleep
 in a soaking bed

;
la bouche ouverte,
 , ,
 ,
 - *Charles-Georges Coqueley de Chaussepierre*

John M. Bennett
Septembre 2017

These two poems, recently written by me, include passages from the late Baroque/Rococo erasure work by Charles-Georges Coqueley de Chaussepierre, *Le Roué Vertueux, poëme en prose, En quatre chants, propre à fair, en cas de besoin, un Drame à jouer deux fois par semaine... 2e édition, à laquelle on a joint la Lettre d'un jeune Métaphysicien*, 1770.

Chaussepierre erased most of the text of a rather conventional and titillating morality tale (analogous to today's "romance novels", although perhaps more comedic), leaving a few scattered words per page, and apparently all of the punctuation. I would venture to say that the text has been greatly improved by this process.

My own poems are not *poèmes-critiques*, but, like all my work as a poet, are attempts to *say it all at once*. Silences, or erasures in this case, are part of that *all*, as are the many things I read, such as the book by Chaussepierre. My process involves, in part, constructing a poem by noting the highlights flashing off the swarming reality of experience, which in this case included *Le Roué Vertueux*, as well as things emerging from various mysterious undercurrents of my mind. To "say it all at once", of course, is impossible, but I need to make the attempt. It is perhaps an attempt toward complete knowledge or understanding. The result, however, is a kind of totem or talisman of that desire, a desire to fully experience my consciousness' place at the center of the universe. We humans are fools full of hubris.

John M. Bennett
Septembre 2017

Crystal Hurdle

alt

~~I have always loved that two Canadian female literary legends, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, respectively, used two pioneering sisters, Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill, respectively, as muse figures, and I, in homage, attempted to revivify Moodie's Canadian classic.~~

alt

Lake visit arks
task thin finite light
with fingers
intent

uncouth bursts a name
forever wonderful
covet by-and-by
refer to the name
possess word
curiosity tomb

retch ever beast and bird
over
ere
no

no trace in this word

his word
and he to his
and they to man
an alt word of silver
and

and
and
with their own hands
muse spite
tempt awe

text light fuses to dim again

From: *Roughing It in the Bush* by Susanna Moodie

Scarcely a week passed away without my being visited by the dark strangers; and as my husband never allowed them to eat with the servants (who viewed them with the same horror that Mrs. D— did black Mollineux), but brought them to his own table, they soon grew friendly and communicative, and would point to every object that attracted their attention, asking a thousand questions as to its use, the material of which it was made, and if we were inclined to exchange it for their commodities?

With a large map of Canada, they were infinitely delighted. In a moment they recognised every bay and headland in Ontario, and almost screamed with delight when, following the course of the Trent with their fingers, they came to their own lake.

How eagerly each pointed out the spot to his fellows; how intently their black heads were bent down, and their dark eyes fixed upon the map. What strange, uncouth exclamations of surprise burst from their lips as they rapidly repeated the Indian names for every lake and river on this wonderful piece of paper.

The old chief, Peter Nogan, begged hard for the coveted treasure. He would give “Canoe, venison, duck, fish, for it; and more by-and-by.”

I felt sorry that I was unable to gratify his wishes; but the map had cost upwards of six dollars, and was daily consulted by my husband, in reference to the names and situations of localities in the neighbourhood.

I had in my possession a curious Japanese sword, which had been given to me by an uncle of Tom Wilson’s—a strange gift to a young lady; but it was on account of its curiosity, and had no reference to my warlike propensities. This sword was broad, and three-sided in the blade, and in shape resembled a moving snake. The hilt was formed of a hideous carved image of one of their war-gods; and a more villainous-looking wretch was never conceived by the most distorted imagination. He was represented in a sitting attitude, the eagle’s claws, that formed his hands, resting upon his knees; his legs terminated in lions’ paws; and his face was a strange compound of beast and bird—the upper part of his person being covered with feathers, the lower with long, shaggy hair. The case of this awful weapon was made of wood, and, in spite of its serpentine form, fitted it exactly. No trace of a join could be found in this scabbard, which was of hard wood, and highly polished.

One of my Indian friends found this sword lying upon the bookshelf, and he hurried to communicate the important discovery to his companions. Moodie was absent, and they brought it to me to demand an explanation of the figure that formed the hilt.

I told them that it was a weapon that belonged to a very fierce people who lived in the east, far over the Great Salt Lake; that they were not Christians as we were, but said their prayers to images made of silver, and gold, and ivory, and

wood, and that this was one of them; that before they went into battle they said their prayers to that hideous thing, which they had made with their own hands.

The Indians were highly amused by this relation, and passed the sword from one to the other, exclaiming, "A god!—Owgh!—A god!"

But, in spite of these outward demonstrations of contempt, I was sorry to perceive that this circumstance gave the weapon a great value, in their eyes, and they regarded it with a sort of mysterious awe.

For several days they continued to visit the house, bringing along with them some fresh companion to look at Mrs. Moodie's *god!*—until, vexed and annoyed by the delight they manifested at the sight of the eagle-beaked monster, I refused to gratify their curiosity, by not producing him again.

Gian Lombardo

Not Without Ra[p]ture

Aid & A_Bet appeared in 2008 (<http://www.blazevox.org/ebk-gLombardo.pdf>). Composed of two (equal) sections: “A_Bet,” an abecdarium of 26 pieces; and “Aid,” a 26-piece erasure project. The sum of two halves drawn from the well of two different impulses wed by construct into its own deck of cards, from which one could engage in a game to pass the time.

The deck includes at the end a note on the construction of that house, which reads thus:

The section “Aid” was constructed from published texts. The method was to extract words, phrases and, on rare occasions, more complete thoughts from these texts—usually in order. These extractions were then combined to form the individual texts of this section. On occasion tenses or number were altered. On rarer occasions additional words not from the originating texts strayed in (usually with minds of their own). This general method, however, varied in execution and degree in each piece. There were no over-arching criteria for the selection of the originating texts—simply that they bore some interest. No implication is made that this selection is comprehensive. Nor is any statement being made by their inclusion. While the choices are not absolutely random, they do not constitute a dictum. The original texts that were used in “Aid” are: *Dadaist Manifesto*; Arcestratos, *Gastrology*; *Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals*; Confucius, *The Analects*; Thomas Bayes, “An Essay Towards Solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances”; *Declaration of Independence*; Nicholas Copernicus, *On the Revolutions*; Albert Einstein, “Relativity: The Special and General Theory”; Archimedes, *The Method of Treating Mechanical Problems*; Galileo Galilei, *Dialogs Concerning Two New Sciences*; James D. Watson & Francis Crick, “Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids: A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid”; Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species*; Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*; Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*; *Magna Carta*; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?*; Aldous Huxley, *Doors of Perception*; Sigmund Freud, *Dream Psychology*; Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*; Leonardo Da Vinci, *Notebooks*; André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*; and Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. This list does not corre-

spond to the order of the pieces in this book. While it is very apparent the “derivation” of some of the pieces, the intent is not to make them derivatives of the originals, or to comment on the original texts in any way. If anything, these pieces may be reinventions, and an homage to the power of thought and of words.

This note is repeated here so I can say here what, in part, possibly wholly, was not said in that note. To voice the lies, and lines, of omission. These lies—as all art might attempt, or pose itself, as the conscious voice of truth—do not constitute a coherent, linear narrative (pardon the expression, but do not constitute a whole), but rather form a scattershot compendium of memories, images of memories and memories of images.—If you will, this narration engages its own scrapping of reality. The creative foundation of the completeness and veracity of memory. That contention.

The title of the book—with the conjoinder—calls to mind jurisprudence and criminality. Aiding and abetting a criminal. Succor to the perpetrator, to the perpetual traitor, to the accused. Summons the Underground Railroad. Help given to Black slaves escaping their bonds, to cut away the chains. Gain liberty.

On one level, the author is a criminal. Someone on the outside, tapping at the window. Someone who has done wrong. Done somebody wrong. Clearly viewed as being in the wrong.

One another level, there’s the impulse to undermine slavery—any institution based on the slavery of thought, of behavior, of feeling, of association, of congregation, of expression.

Be thus the crutch. The wagon with the red cross. A kind word. A word out of context. An extended hand. To blot out common notions. Commotions.

The thought of the palimpsest cannot escape the thought about erasure. Writing over. Layers. Constructs of layers. Constraints of layers. Walls papered and painted over how many—too many?—times. What appears, what comes through, are examples of failure. Imperfect erasures. Palimpsests speak of power. The Church eradicates the pagan, the heathen, the unholy. But neglect, accidents shine through, frequently via different light. Eyes augmented, suddenly what’s been there all along becomes illuminated. Been there all the time. Words rebelling. Duality, multiplicity of texts. Persistence. Resistance. Perseverance. Subversion. Inversion.

(Now mind drifts and there’s Chico Marx exclaiming, “You want words? I gots lots of words.” [Please check veracity of quote: beware ye who trust the narrator.]

Digression point attained. Success. One way to deal with power is not to go through it, but around it. Omertà, as it were.

The victor, it’s been said, always writes the history. Overwrites. The vanquished’s voice vanishes.

Paradox. Erasure as freedom. Erasure as domination. Ultimately, ultimate freedom can be terrifying. Terror a merciless jailor. Vanquisher.

By day, by night as well, I make a living, sometimes in part, sometimes in whole, editing. Mutating text. Mutilating text. Revise. Seeing again. And again. Changing the light. Versioning. Any version but the latest—the one that's alive—becomes foul. Old texts, old words, stinking like days-old fish.

But now bait.

What bites? What tears at flesh? What makes word?

Each piece based off a selection. A curation. What to save when the house burns. What not selected becomes expunged. The rest kept. Dance, words. Allow the author the illusion of being reborn in them.

All these shattered bottles. Broken statues. Battered books. Sea glass. Where unsmoothed edges cut deep.

And what remains. Not a question anymore.

Visually, the worn palimpsest becomes collage. Of symbols. What has become unstuck and then stuck again. Where glue is the common factor. Where two scraps collide. Where two shards collude. A spark in a vacuum bridging a gap. Illumined. They used to call codices that. In one realm of physics a word becomes a vacuum.

Personality as a force. As the result of who we are not. Bits of others. The things that move us this way or that. Compulsions without contexts. Remember the gist ground down, the tone as echo, the *reductio ad nutus*.

In a field covered by a net only the nodes matter. Everything else escapes.

To control words. Or be controlled.

Does absence equate to silence? Possessed by lack?

A knife in hand, scraping. A hand with an eraser. A hand with White-Out. A hand with a black Sharpie. A hand tearing paper. Tears on paper. Manipulations. What obeys? What listens? What dares speak?

An eradicated word—to whom does that belong? If I forget. If I let it slip. If I let it fall. If I?

Do words belong? To someone, somewhere, somehow, sometime. This generation castigates the next because they have no respect for property rights. Is what's mine yours? What's mined yours? Mind becomes you, doesn't it?

If what's made is X, but becomes Y. Are words theft? Can I tell you only my story? My words? If stories are lies is that my truth? To utter no matter how well, how sincerely, how aptly, how skillfully, how sillyfully is to miss the mark. Does betraying the truth equate to day betraying night?

If the netted field reduced to nodes begs someone to connect the dots? Draw lines. Are lines the catch? What gets thrown back? Are we the bait, and what has bitten us?

Aid, my aid, my heavenly slave, turned from the green one, begins with a cry for freedom. Jettison chains. Leap out. Forward:

Demarcation of Indigence

When in the (inter) coarse(ness) of humane events. When everything fails. Again. When yes means yes-and-no. When the net is full and sinks and sinks. . .

Hold in hand lack of evidence. Hold that all have evolved as needed, enduring an explication told with certain unalienable connotations. Hold that hairs are split and teased amid the pursing of hats.

Refuse wholesome good. Forbid pressing neglect. Dissolve firmness. Endeavor others hither. Erect swarms to eat out substance.

When words are based less on gift than graft how can we mutually pledge lips, eyes and sacred breath?

As part of another life that is the elimination of the other lives that can be led, that have been led, I stand before a whiteboard. Write on the surface. The surface that's been wiped clean. And wiped clean over and over. Today there are marks of what had been letters. Stray arrows and arcs. And then, when done, wiped imperfectly to prompt other arrows pointing elsewhere to other arcs skeletonizing constellations.

Scratches reveal. All those dirty parts gone clean. All those coverings stripped away. Naked. And for this shame and lust or lust for shame.

Is there but a single story? Is all that everybody does but prattle it over and over? Is there but one word? Yell at the cancer-ridden body, "Become whole again," "Become healed again." Stories and their words bake under the sun. Sweep away ash. Leave the charred bits of bone. Roll them on the ground have them seed the plain.

When story ends. When word ends. When end. These are all likelihoods. With a certain amount of prey in a certain amount of area, there's the likelihood something might be caught when the net is drawn up. In that draw are blanks fired? Dare draw whatever is not. Demand words fall in line and bark, "Present!":

Role Call

An unknown happened and failed when loss had no reason to refuse an event.*

I am right, considering you may proceed according to the number of times either ball rests upon the base of the whole figure.

To render this rule the highest value becomes impractical when nothing is explained.

Turn to an infinity of sides no more than to burning wood or falling objects.

This problem may not be amiss. Ignorant. See again.

In other words, I have gone further than intended here, once more drawing a blank.

* Be against disadvantage.

Only words. Not life. Or life as it's known. Maybe that's something else. Two ends. Arc. Flash in a vacuum.

If Aid can no longer be of help, must it be buried alive? What if it refuses betrayal? Can that be sung? Or should that be erased? Now's the time to tell the truth. The lies will answer for themselves.

[The train ride has ended. Destination and origination attained.]

Jane Monson

The Undone and Others Poems

The Undone

Somewhere inside her was the memory of a man she had known for a long time. At least twenty years she'd calculated, straight after he came home to tell her the way he'd voted. The same hand that registered their vows on one piece of paper undid them by a cross on another. She couldn't take in what needed to follow, so focussed on place, things and furniture; not just her own, but theirs—the other men to blame that had also moved houses; heaved the lives of their family into something they didn't choose, didn't sign. Emptying her life of rooms she'd made with him, she leans back against another temporary wall; watches paper blister on the other side and in her new imagination conjures him into the false quietude. His shadow sits behind America's most legendary desk and orders the room to 'sunburst' Bush, replacing busts, rugs, curtains—anything of colour, except gold. She replays a nightmare of him carefully choosing the next pen; smirking over the replacement of his predecessor's hand even as he forces its unfamiliar shape into the snub of his fingers. She sees his face loom into focus as a crowd is faded out. An empty glance across each document, he waves the golden nib, aims then fires his name across lives, countries, races, religions, families and hopes; casts their futures back into their pasts; cast hers back into a past that until now, no longer needed to exist.

Wife, Table, Cake

He reverses, backs the chair into a wall and something shoots from a perfect hole in his mouth. She inhales, taps ash into a jam jar, closes her eyes and curls her hand around the glass. 'I drawn forks about candle,' he proffers, dropping and sliding his finger over the table like a pen. She doesn't like correcting him anymore. Anymore than she likes guiding him back to bed in the middle of the night, from the road, the garden, the living room floor, the bath. Last night she found him in the kitchen, concentrated in the fridge-light, standing with his hands on the shelves moving the food about like Scrabble tiles, trying to spell his name in

salad. He'd written for months by speaking and tracing the words over every surface in the house with his finger. Sometimes it became a race between his mouth and his hand, where he would hear himself say the word then chase his breath to the table, chair, wall, cupboards, oven and shelves, diving through the finish-line hand-first. She married him without a bomb in his brain; he would remain her husband until it went off. She recalled early signs of pressure, where sentences began to lose their stuffing; his face an open mouth at dinner or breakfast for long stretches like a sort of horrified yawn, where he meant to tell her about the day, but would pause and ask her to pass something instead—an elephant, the road, or her hair. Tonight, the same table, same wife, same glass, ash, wine, same man she's always known, just different words, different timing. And though she still recognises his voice and his hands, she watches them move against each other now, over all the surfaces and holes, just outside of her. Tonight, he misses her face by a whistle. Tonight, he blows on her skin and she pretends to go out.

Alice Aphasia

Words kept vanishing or tripping on her tongue, as though she was going blind in the mouth. Inside her head, she knew they were there, sitting up in chairs, lounging on sofas, talking and eating at tables, satisfying whatever it was that they wanted. But when she parted her jaw, they scattered in all directions—wrecked beyond repair and recognition. The few that remained un-damaged, were either lost, or slipping in apology towards death. A blind Alice, she thought, whose mouth stumbled about things, too small, too large, or too strange, and whose sighs and yawns of despair bore the clout of hurricanes and blizzards. Just when silence seemed the only answer, she removed her tongue and put a pen in its place. Over time, she forgot to watch them. But they were all still there, her unseen slaves—banished from chairs, tables, lounging on sofas, swinging from lights, splitting from laughter—slowly learning to satisfy whatever it was that she wanted.

The Tuscan Table

Just before they'd had a chance to serve, something forced their exit. A war perhaps? Though the stillness in the wooden plates, the cups and settled table-dust suggest that destruction had no place here. A message then? Someone they had to run towards before dinner was served, someone they couldn't leave once they were there? Droppings from mice and birds mixed in with the dust and debris cover suggestions, clues. There are no chair scrapes in the floorboards, though the seats approach the table in different ways, their expressions dignified, or spell-bound. One looks towards the door, like an expectant child, a pair almost face each other in timeless conference, and one is pushed into the table, as though scolded, but determined to face the consequences. No trace of hand nor feet any-

more, the prompted exeunt is an old tale; the story of a thousand Tuscan houses, silent shells for tables, dined then undined. They call the villages of the houses, ghost villages, *paesi fantasma*. Articles blame landslides, migrations, poverty. The trained eyes and shoes of intermittent strangers scan the floors and walls and ceilings; trace the light fittings and furniture in centralised voices, take notes, images, films. But the things refuse to divulge the truth. The chairs, the table won't betray the room; they have no interest in our curiosity simply to get stored in lists for a while, archived in pictures and for centuries merely reflect back what we still won't know. In the houses of the living, the houses of the dead are often discussed; their empty plates, our groaning tables, their perpetual night, our chase by day.

*

Daily Erasureism

In these prose poems I focus on daily forms of erasureism—in language, objects and in private and public contexts. Through them I try and attend to and narrate the times when people, places, words and objects go through periods of disappearance or move erratically between being unwitnessed and unseen. The poems try to honour and read these unwitnessed spaces where bodies, minds and relationships miss and keep missing each other and try and exist in an all too palpable void where there are more questions than answers. Erasureism here becomes a useful tool or way to highlight what happens when words, objects or people are removed and we're left with the inevitable presence of absence that fills the 'empty' space. Through exploring these particular micro-examples of erasureism, I attempt to isolate and further explore the way we live in a world of constant undoing by doing; in a microscopic way the prose poems are commentaries on the greater or more global ways that we destroy and create simultaneously. We cannot help but exist through these kinds of erasureisms, from the minute we understand that we arrived here through birth and will exit through death, however you interpret or define these terms and beliefs.

Language is understood as and considered our most significant grip on the world; our main anchor and the way we gauge life and in turn are judged, accepted or determined. Once we acquire words consciously we try and use them towards our advantage, then grapple with or learn from the consequences when language does not go according to plan and works against us—through misinterpretation, malintention or actions that follow beyond our control. When language starts to disappear or is erased, so does our control on the planet at large and the life we've made within the grand scale of things. At best, through this kind of erasureism, we create another way of life where we focus more on what we

have rather than what we don't. At worst, we simply start to disappear or vanish altogether.

Erasurism is not treated as a theory in these poems—it is a tangible part of our every waking and sleeping moment. Each time we lift a finger or open a mouth to make a difference to our own lives or someone else's, this wide variety of absences and vanishings is all too felt and known. Content and form mirror each other in this respect and the use of the prose poem as a way of supporting the content's exploration of erasurism is intentional. In my own use or interpretation of the prose poem form, the choice to use the sentence and paragraph, rather than the line break and verse is an intrinsic part of illustrating the disappearance of space—mental and physical. An otherwise viewable and visible rhythm is then internalised or swallowed by the unbroken paragraph to the point where it doesn't look like a poem anymore. In turn, the eradication of the line break impacts on our ability to see any of the individual images in isolation; instead juxtapositions or a linked series of images take us through to the end. Music and image, therefore, enter into a very different relationship based on a continued manifestation of the thought process on the page, rather than a broken or more obviously controlled/crafted one.

Approaching a piece of poetry that *looks* like prose already encourages a process of erasurism in terms of our pre-conceived or school-learned rules about the key characteristics of separate genres. By virtue of this acquired knowledge alone, reading a prose poem often leads to confusion and a feeling of being in an unknown and unstable environment. But within this strange absence of 'poetry,' there is a unique opportunity to be had with prose poetry and a chance to make erasurism work to the writer's advantage; a place to talk to the reader in another way: directly, but in extremely compressed layers of time and space. To work with a form that is neither one genre nor the other, introduces a space which can either be treated as non-existent (and indeed prose poetry has been viewed as such) or it can create something out of nothing. The prose poem erases the boundary wall between accepted definitions of prose and definitions of poetry, then steps into each genre to take a few key features back through the invisible wall. These characteristics are then distilled and reconfigured; as the two genres merge somewhat intensely and become erased as separate entities, another genre is created. Subsequently, many of the differences normally assigned to each genre are present, but they are used or developed in other ways; balanced carefully enough to not take the piece in the direction of either poetry or prose. In other words a prose poem might have a character and a plot of sorts, but these are condensed down so rigorously that you're left with the essence of person and action; their haiku version, rather than their epic. Likewise you may recognise image, sound, internal rhyme and metaphor in a prose poem, but when these are within the sentence and the paragraph block, rather than the line and therefore

contextualised within what we recognise as prose, we're no longer in the zone of pure poetry and its familiar reference points.

In these prose poems (and this can be typical of many others), such a condensed and focussed approach to large themes and complex situations, means that the eye of the piece often burrows down into what is not said and seen, rather than observe a more elaborate illustration of what someone might say and do. In this respect, the most important erasurist influences on these poems are Francis Ponge and Nathalie Sarraute. Ponge takes objects, but makes them 'disappear' in the place of their object-equivalent in language. Sarraute probes, reveals and gives substance to the invisible gap between thought and speech: draws out those things we think, but don't say and makes us look very closely at either the peculiar things or ridiculously 'normal' things we do and say on a daily basis. This fidelity to speech and actions expected of us by society, but betrayal of what we're *actually* thinking as individuals is a driving force behind Sarraute's *Tropisms*. Sarraute looks behind the scenes of our everyday gestures and replaces our public, visible performance with the all the unsaid, thoughts and feelings that rarely see the light of day. She shows us where gestures and words are disguised as convention and dailiness and how and where their damage and impact on us is paramount: we absorb these hidden spaces between thought and word and word and gesture. We live in that normally erased and hidden space and morph accordingly. Where Ponge seeks a verbal equivalent of an object, Sarraute seeks an object equivalent of thought and speech so we can see what has been erased on a physical level.

In my prose poems, I look at the relationship between speech and objects and how closely they interact as soon as one of them looks set to disappear. For example, in 'Wife, Table, Cake' and 'Alice Aphasia,' language is disappearing and objects begin to take their place, whether it's using things to communicate, or that the absence of language is having a physical and tangible impact on that person's relationship with the world. In 'The Tuscan Table,' language is trying to make sense of why all of these houses have been abandoned for so long, but the silence of objects can only take that language of witnessing that absence so far. In 'The Undone,' the objects are controlled by the different languages, if you like, of each President and each time the room changes, the predecessor is erased and replaced by the statements that the new figure wants to make visible. In terms of daily erasurism, the poem is exploring this more global manifestation of eradication through the impact that it's had on the personal life of a couple, the subsequent void of their marriage and the nightmare of mind and place that ensues.

Erasurism has to start with or from something. How and why we make that something disappear is precisely what gives erasurism so much presence, fear as well as value in our everyday lives. When something is erased, we want to know where, how, why and what was it? We see more clearly the stuff that stays, but are

constantly drawn to what disappeared, either because we can't see it, we miss it or because we want to fill that space with something else. In life, erasurism is more than often too terrifying to contemplate. In art, erasurism gives us a method and opportunity to destroy and create simultaneously. In terms of life and art and art and life, erasurism gives us a way to see and argue where the two are clearly divided and where entwined. On a personal note, erasurism has given me a language and way to re-understand the prose poem, a form that has been compared to the Loch Ness Monster and the bomb, and otherwise referred to as the non or anti-genre. Although these terms and analogies are fast becoming outdated as the prose poem becomes more visible, its reputation for doing away with line-breaks, generic walls, rules and parallel discourses, keeps it safely within erasurist territory.

Elisabeth Waltregny, Michel Delville

A note on *Ali e t o l o s s*

Erasurist art is essentially a kind of rewriting. It is rooted as much in contemporary philosophy's deconstructionist turn as in Duchampian found objects and Situationist détournements. One of the earliest examples of textual erasurism in contemporary poetry is Ronald Johnson's 1977 *RADI OS*, a partial obliteration of the first four books of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* preserving only a few words from each page of the source-text.

Ali e t o l o s s subjects Lewis Carroll's *Ali(c)e T(hr)o(ugh the) Lo(oking Gla)ss* to a similar treatment, revealing the lyrical backbone of the source-text, isolating some of its vital semantic "organs" while simultaneously responding to the deep and complex forms of Elisabeth Waltregny's photographs, which were themselves inspired by Lewis Carroll's specular worlds. Each poem is composed of words taken from one of the twelve chapters of *Alice* in the order in which they appear, the line breaks indicating the "gaps" in the source-text.

10.

a perfect scream
opening and shutting
as dark as it can
a
thick black cloud
wings
out of sight
under a large
shawl



13.

wool and water
Queen
needles
dear me
a poor sort of
crime



15.

can't think
of the
thunder
rolling round
knocking down
things
try to remember
the use of it



17.

the wall
was
screaming
at
invisible
faces



18.

something
like
geography
something like
roofs taken off
stalks
them
shy so suddenly



22.

heavy things
vanished
not
with a bang
but
with
a
deaf
kick



Formes poétiques contemporaines, Séries 1,2 et 3

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