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ABSENT THINGS AS IF THEY ARE PRESENT

A HISTORY OF LITERATURE CREATED BY ERASURE, COLLAGE, OMISSION, AND WITE-OUT

DISCUSSED: *Being God, An Indefinite Definition, A Summer Home for Working Girls, Amazonian Plagiarism Hunters, Blatant Freudianism, Credit to Wavy Gravy, The Essence of Property, Passing Judgment on Coleridge's Penmanship, A Very Significant Omission, Bathtub Wisdom, Differing Views of the Pope and the U.S. Government*

I.

The night before he died, I promised my father I would write a book for him. I was eighteen and harboring profound confidence charged with profound grief. He was eighty, and under so much morphine I doubt he even understood.

Not only was I unable to write my father's eulogy, I was unable to write him a letter for his coffin. All week, in a depressed but strangely sleepless state, I filled a notebook with the same sentence: "A blank sheet of paper is God's way of saying it's not so easy to be God."

II.

The dictionary defines *erase* as "to scrape or rub out (anything written, engraved, etc.); to efface, expunge, obliterate." Its Latin root roughly translates as "to scrape away." These definitions imply loss and destruction. They call to mind Richard Nixon's audio-tape gaps, the photographic manipulations of Stalin, the Archimedes Palimpsest, the missing fragments of Sappho. Death.

Heidegger practiced 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

The Jefferson Bible, showing the text Thomas Jefferson created by cutting and rearranging books from the New Testament
Image courtesy of the National Museum of American History

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.

Literary erasure has its own definition. To erase is to create a new work out of an existing one: canonical, obscure, wonderful, terrible, it's the erasurist's choice.

When Mary Ruefle whited out select words from *A Little White Shadow,* an obscure nineteenth-century book published "for the Benefit of a Summer Home for Working Girls," lines of captivating poetry emerged: "It was my duty to keep the piano filled with roses." Wave Books brought out a facsimile of her erasure, preserving the appearance of her small, whited-out copy, under the appropriate (and appropriated) title *A Little White Shadow.* When Jen Bervin ghosted select words in Shakespeare's sonnets, her own free-verse poems rose to the surface in darker ink:

> Against my love shall be, as **I am** now,
> With Time's injurious hand crush'd and o'erworn;
> When hours have drain'd his blood and fill'd his brow
> With lines and wrinkles; when his youthful morn
> Hath travell'd on to age's steepy night;
> And all those beauties whereof now he's king
> Are **vanishing or vanished** out of sight,
> Stealing away the treasure of his spring;
> For such a time do I now fortify
> Against confounding age's cruel knife,
> That he shall never cut from memory
> My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life:
> His beauty shall **in these black lines** be seen,
> And they shall live, and he in them still green.

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." The more practical answer: compared to writing, erasing feels easy.

But I am here to convince you: 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 else behind.

III.

Let's start where most people think erasure starts. The year was 1966, the place was a furniture repository in London, and Tom Phillips had just bought a forgotten Victorian novel, W. H. Mallock's *A Human Document,* for threepence. Its narrator tells us that a Hungarian countess gave him the strange journal of a deceased, possibly Russian woman. At first, he says, it reads like your average journal, but suddenly, in bursts, it exhibits the qualities of a novel and a scrapbook: the woman writes of herself in the third person, describes the unspoken thoughts of a man, and occasionally breaks her narrative with letters and fragments of poetry evidently written by the man. "As they stand," the narrator observes, the journal's components "are not a story in any literary sense; though they enable us, or rather force us, to construct one out of them for ourselves." The narrator treats the journal as malleable; by chance, Phillips stopped by the bookstall with the express purpose of finding an old book that he could mold into a new one.

Phillips began by crossing out unwanted words with pen and ink. Then he turned to painting, typing, and collaging over words (he decided no material extraneous to the novel could be used, so all collage fragments came from other pages of the book). The resulting work explodes with colors and shapes. Some pages contain unmistakable images surrounding the remaining text: the flag of England, the outline of a moth, a dark rainbow. Others are spectacularly confusing: is that a ladder leading from petticoats into smoke on page two hundred, or a broken broom? My favorite *ars poetica* moment is when the words *the next lips* and *unfastened her lips* emerge from opposing sides of abstract lips. With visual eloquence, Phillips reminds us of the transformative power of any novel, and of how material, how thinglike, words can be. Folding one page over and flattening it onto the page below resulted in his erasure's title: *A Humument;* i.e., *A Hum*[*an Doc*]*ument*. The project began "as idle play at the fringe of my work and preoccupations," Phillips explains in his afterword. More than

four decades later, he continues to erase *A Human Document*.

After Phillips embarked on *A Humument,* dozens of acknowledged erasures have been published, from *Radi Os* (Ronald Johnson's erasure of *Paradise Lost*) to *Tree of Codes* (Jonathan Safran Foer's erasure of Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*), and every so often Phillips's admirers deride these erasures as plagiarisms of his magnum opus. With unacknowledged irony, the accusers assume the role of nineteenth-century "plagiarism hunters," literary gumshoes in search of stolen lines, sentences, metaphors, allusions, plots, ideas, anything that could be considered another author's originality. In other words: everything. A plagiarism hunter would report such thefts in an article in order to embarrass the offender. These "thousands of feeble writers" who "subsist by detecting imitations, real or supposed" infuriated Thomas De Quincey. Tennyson deplored this "prosaic set" of "men of great memories and no imagination, who impute themselves to the poet, and so believe that he, too, has no imagination, but is for ever poking his nose between the pages of some old volumes in order to see what he can appropriate."

One contemporary plagiarism hunter, in his Amazon review of *A Little White Shadow,* implied that Ruefle should have credited Phillips: "I see no mention of the great artist, Tom Phillips." Another arraigned Foer's originality, arguing that *A Humument* long prefigured *Tree of Codes:* "More directly, could there be another form of unconscious plagiarism involved?" Foer did credit Phillips in *Tree of Codes*'s afterword, but what bothered this plagiarism hunter is that Phillips's erasure came first. OK. Let's splash back a decade or so before Phillips began erasing.

In 1953, over the course of one month and forty rubber erasers, Robert Rauschenberg erased a drawing by de Kooning and called it *Erased de Kooning.* Rauschenberg said he wanted "to purge [him]self of [his] teaching." Calvin Tomkins said, "What else, in God's name, could you think about his wanting to *erase* a de Kooning drawing? The implications were so blatantly Freudian, the act itself so obviously a symbolic (if good-natured) patricide." Jasper Johns called it "an additive subtraction." Had Phillips been aware of Rauschenberg's erasure? Is *A Humument* an unconscious plagiarism?

Phillips cited the newspaper-cut-up techniques of William Burroughs as a strong influence, just as Burroughs had cited those of Brion Gysin. No one cited Caleb Whitefoord. Who?

Does it matter?

As Emerson put it, authors do not weave "their web from their own bowels." Isn't every book an erasure?

IV.

A belief in the purely originating author underpins Anglo-American copyright law as well as the European *droit d'auteur:* to be protected under copyright, a work must prove its "originality." William Blackstone invoked originality when he wrote about literary property in his four-volume treatise *Commentaries on the Laws of England:* "When a man by the exertion of his rational powers has produced an original work, he seems to have clearly a right to dispose of that identical work as he pleases, and any attempt to vary the disposition he has made of it, appears to be an invasion of that right of property." The final volume of *Commentaries* was published in 1769, the same year an English court ruled that no literary works could enter the public domain. In that decision, Justice David R. Aston expressed that a literary work embodies the personality of its author and therefore belongs only to that individual: "I do not know, nor can I comprehend any property more emphatically a man's own, nay, more incapable of being mistaken, than his literary works." Exactly two hundred years later, in his essay "What Is an Author?," Foucault questions our tendency to think of authors as isolated individuals, but suggests that if we stop thinking of authors as individuals, we may stop thinking of other kinds of people in that way.

We may want to regard an author's style as a palpable, individ-

ual thing, but writing reveals style to be a nebulous aggregation of other influences. Allen Ginsberg openly credited his influences: everyone from William Shakespeare to Wavy Gravy. Drafts from his time as a young poet include imitations he made of William Carlos Williams, William Blake, even the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets John Donne and Andrew Marvell. Ginsberg began writing *Howl* by imitating Williams's stepped triadic form. In the middle of typing the poem, a new style emerged, with long, incantatory lines (influenced by Whitman) and imaginative leaps and fractured syntax (influenced by American modernist giants such as Hart Crane). The San Francisco authorities who prosecuted *Howl* as obscene were likely unfamiliar with Catullus or Rimbaud, two poets Ginsberg devotedly studied.

Ginsberg shows that by imitating the style of other writers, as well as by resisting them, a writer develops his or her own style. Erasure is simply an exaggerated form of writing. "We say that an author is *original* when we cannot trace the hidden transformation that others underwent in his mind," Valéry wrote. "What a man does either repeats or refutes what someone else has done—repeats it in other tones, refines or amplifies or simplifies it." But instead of concealing or denying their influences, erasurists acknowledge that they have come from somewhere, not nowhere, and make clear the chaotic process of creating art.

Mary Ruefle openly disclosed her process not with an afterword but by publishing *A Little White Shadow* as a photographic reproduction of her whited-out copy. Even though she erased select words from a Victorian book, the result is stamped with her unmistakable voice: pared-down statements that at first sound emotionally removed but express profound emotion: "other people read / sonnets / but / my cousin

A page from Mary Ruefle's A Little White Shadow, *2006. Image courtesy of Wave Books.*

Suvia / never cared for / blood / and in this as in / most things I agreed with her." Compare those lines with lines in her recent poem in *Poetry* magazine, "White Buttons": "I like to read in tree houses / whenever I can which is seldom / and sometimes never." In both instances, her casual tone is deeper and more heartbreaking than it sounds. Even a century-old book can generate modern poetry.

But by referencing their sources, erasurists risk criticism and even legal action. The copyright lawyer Augustine Birrell argued in 1899: "The essence of Property is an unwillingness to share it, but the literary art lives by communication; its essence is the telling of a tale with the object of creating an impression and of causing repetition… the author's rights are not based on a desire to exclusive possession of that which he has written." However, not all copyright lawyers agree. In general, if an author quotes a significant portion of another author's work that lies outside the public domain (published after 1923), our legal system considers it copyright infringement. Even if someone considers an erasure an act of plagiarism, which is not to be confused with copyright infringement (no current statute, criminal or civil, mentions the word *plagiarism*), some lawyers treat plagiarism cases as cases of unfair competition or of violations of the doctrine of moral rights. Because erasures are often unrecognizable from their sources, or use sources in the public domain (*Paradise Lost,* for example), they for the most part have avoided the courts. Foer's publisher wrote to the Bruno Schulz estate, and the estate gladly approved the project and charged no permission fees. When Joshua Beckman, however, erased *Poet in New York* by Federico García Lorca, its American publisher at the time—Farrar, Straus and Giroux—sent an order to Beckman's tiny (now-defunct) publisher, Left Hand Books, to stop the printing of the book. Ultimately, Beckman and his publisher complied. In effect, his erasure was erased.

What makes erasure unsettling is that one author is appropriating one text. The nineteenth-century novelist and unblushing plagiarist Charles Reade discriminated between heterogeneous and homogeneous works of literature. "There is a vital distinction," he wrote, "between taking ideas from a homogenous source, and from a heterogeneous source; and only the first mentioned of these two acts is plagiarism: the latter is more like jewel-setting." Would Reade consider erasure plagiarism? I don't think so. Appropriation proponents like Reade believed that appropriation depended on how successfully the writer integrated the appropriated material. If plagiarism is to steal the style or expressed thoughts of someone else, then erasure is a psychological lobotomy of personal identity. The erasurist can change another writer's work until it is no longer itself.

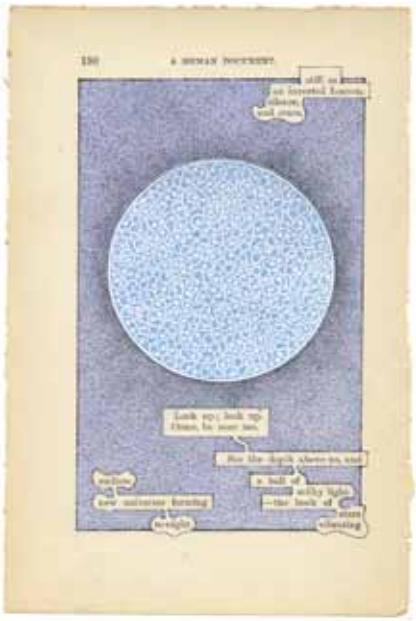
v.

Creating ex nihilo is a romantic, but not an entirely Romantic, conceit.

In 1759, Edward Young published *Conjectures on Original Composition,* a manifesto for Romantic poetic theory. "An *Original,*" Young wrote, "may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it *grows,* it is not *made: Imitations* are often a sort of *manufacture* wrought up by those *mechanics, art,* and *labour,* out of preexistent materials not their own." The nineteenth-century English Romantics, those thought to be the hereSiarchs of originality, repeated Young's claims, praising the originating hero-artist. Spontaneous, unbidden creation reigns above all, they preached.

Supposedly.

In "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," Wordsworth claimed the writer should "owe nothing



Page 190 from Tom Phillips's A Humument, *2012. This page will appear in the fifth edition, forthcoming from Thames & Hudson, and in the* Humument *app.*

but to nature and his own genius." Coleridge lauded Wordsworth's poetry as "perfectly unborrowed." Shelley wrote in *A Defence of Poetry* that poets possess the power to make "forms of opinion and action never before conceived." Did the Romantics popularize originality, or have we erased their contradictions in favor of a more compelling story?

Wordsworth borrowed descriptions of daffodils from his sister Dorothy's diary when writing his famous poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," and even credited its two best lines to his wife, Mary: "They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude." Coleridge translated German idealist philosophers, particularly Schelling, and presented their writing as his own in *Biographia Literaria*. (Coleridge's defenders call it accidental and not dishonest, as Coleridge, they explain, was a messy note-taker.) Wordsworth and Coleridge even developed (with Dorothy's help!) ideas for what would become Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* which he based on a book by an English privateer: "Much the greatest part of the story was Mr. Coleridge's invention," Wordsworth would later write, "but certain parts I myself suggested."

But let's make a lengthy example of Shelley. Shelley wrote that originality "arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure." Yet if you read his letters chronologically, you can see that his anxiety to be original caused him severe writer's block. In 1818 he wrote to William Godwin, "I exercised myself, in the despair of producing anything original." That same day, he wrote to Thomas Love Peacock, "I have lately found myself totally incapable of original composition." The next year he wrote to Leigh Hunt explaining that he had begun translating Latin because he "could absolutely do nothing else… original." Two years later, jealous of Lord Byron's success, he wrote to

Peacock, "I write nothing and probably shall write no more."

Yet in 1820, in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound,* Shelley called complete poetic originality a ruse: "As to imitation, poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which they are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man, or in nature, but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought, and with the contemporary condition of them." He continued, in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam,* "There must be a resemblance, which does not depend on their own will, between all the writers of any particular age," acknowledging "an influence which neither the meanest scribbler, nor the sublimest genius of any era, can escape, and which I have not attempted to escape."

A book that perfectly encapsulates the contradictions and complexities surrounding the English Romantics is an erasure of their works: *Gentle Reader!* by Joshua Beckman, Anthony McCann, and Matthew Rohrer. If you think erasure is valuable as an exercise but lacks literary merit, then I strongly recommend this book. You will find surreal images ("if you would knock at my door / you would hear / a bee pray to god and / the rose take apart the horizon") and straightforward but astonishingly expressed statements ("I would write / myself into the university / and be invincible / which was fatiguing"), evidence that erasure can achieve what Wordsworth called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," even though the process is influenced by prior work.

Only the title appears on its otherwise drab gray cover. The authors credit themselves alphabetically on the book's spine, a reminder that all writing is collaborative; however, they quietly wait until the last pages to cite, poem by poem, the works they erased, such as Wordsworth's "Michael," Shelley's "Julian and Maddalo," and Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison." Never are we told which poet made which erasure. The book's semi-anonymity denies the concept of a singular author, telling us that originality begets originality. A traditional author biography—which ticks through awards, previous publications, and degrees, and lists where the author teaches and lives, another way of saying "Look at me! I exist!"—is printed nowhere in *Gentle Reader!* Its absence is an affirmation: the poem is more important than the poet.

Of course, a perfect affirmation would have been to publish it anonymously, the way Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* first appeared, in 1798. (Coleridge, however, had urged his publisher to issue their work anonymously not for any idealistic reasons but because "Wordsworth's name is nothing—to a large number of persons mine stinks.") Wordsworth, in the preface to the 1802 edition, explains that he asked Coleridge to furnish him with poems for the book. "I should not," he wrote, "have requested this assistance, had I not believed that the poems of my friend would in a great measure have the same tendency as my own, and that, though there would be found a difference, there would be found no discordance in the colours of our style." Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Beckman, McCann, and Rohrer's tendencies are very similar—all three demonstrate an uninhibited play of the imagination—but each possesses a voice recognizably his own. (When Beckman and Rohrer collaborate, as they did with 2002's *Nice Hat. Thanks.,* they write poems recognizably their collective own, a little lighter and more playful than their other work.) In the lines I am about to quote, unusual claims are made believable by their creators' intimate tones. Listen to Rohrer in his poem "Childhood Stories" as he expresses a sophisticated but naive wonder at people's reluctance to accept magical occurrences in life:

> They learned to turn off the
> gravity in an auditorium
> and we all rose into the air,
> the same room where they
> demonstrated
> pow-wows and prestidigitation.
>
> But not everyone believed it.
> That was the most important
> lesson
> I learned—that a truck driven
> by a dog
> could roll down a hill at dusk
> and roll right off a dock into a
> lake

and sink, and if no one believes
you
then what is the point
of telling them wonderful things?

Now observe Beckman assert innocence and then undercut it with guilt in "Final poem for the gently sifting public begins on the streets...":

I am not greedy.
I will do what I am told.
I will not attempt to create the
eucalyptus tree
or steal the lines of other poets.
Oh Peter, I stole a tree from
your poem
and now it is gone, and you
at home
and me without your number.

Finally, compare those passages to the simultaneous clarity and ambiguity in lines by McCann. (He achieves this effect by making an assertion in each line, while avoiding end-stops.)

I came out of the past, with
fingers all stained
Behind my face my brain glows
like carp
It's like this, you'll see, even
in pictures
Leave it to *someone* to figure
that out

Not that this is required knowledge in order to appreciate *Gentle Reader!,* but you might find it interesting: Rohrer has said that his most personal poem appears in its pages. It isn't surprising if you believe empathy is the cornerstone of most great art. To quote Emerson again: "Every man is an inlet to the same, and to all of the same… What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind, is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent." This is what I love about the genre: the words the poet writes (by virtue of erasing others) may well be much more acute and crucial than what the poet thought he or she wanted to say. I won't tell you which poem Rohrer considers his most personal. Correctly guessing each poem's author isn't the fun of *Gentle Reader!* Reading the poems is.

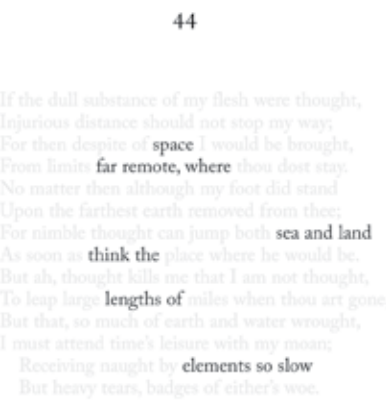
VI.

Erasurists "submit" to new associations, assume the language suggested to them, and their work comes to life fecund with dynamic visions. Published last year by McSweeney's, *Of Lamb* by Matthea Harvey and Amy Jean Porter shows how amazing the visions can be. Harvey erased a biography of the English essayist Charles Lamb into a warped retelling of the celebrated nursery rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb." *Of Lamb* follows the tragic romance between a mercurial Mary and a lovesick Lamb. Told in a set of linked poems by Harvey and paintings by Porter, the words and art sustain each other, like a pair of trees grown together. After Mary rejects Lamb, Harvey's tropes and the changing colors of his wool show Lamb's overwhelming heartbreak: "He could hardly support his shadow," Harvey writes. "A dismal tide rushed in. Lamb turned to drink." Lamb is sent to a madhouse, where his delusions manifest: "I have sometimes in my dreams imagined myself as King Lamb, Emperor Lamb, higher than which is nothing but the Lamb of God."

No visual trace of the erasure's source, David Cecil's *A Portrait of Charles Lamb,* appears in *Of Lamb* (in this instance, erasure is less about the reader seeing absence and more about the writer using it to inform the creative process), though Harvey does credit the biography in her afterword. She explains that because the essayist had a sister named Mary, almost every page contains the words *Mary* and *Lamb.* As Harvey whited out Cecil's book, the nursery rhyme emerged, and dark descriptions of Charles's life with his sister quietly entered. Mary Lamb, at the age of thirty-one, went floridly mad, murdering their mother and wounding

their father. Three years after their father died, Charles brought his sister to live with him, and they spent the rest of their lives together. Even though I began *Of Lamb* aware of the biography, I found myself forgetting about it for pages at a time, knowing only that I was enjoying a book of phenomenal originality and strangeness. With each re-reading, the biography became beside the point. After all, a book should stand on its own. Shouldn't it?

Tree of Codes disproves that. "For years I had wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book," Foer writes in his afterword. "I was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation." He chose his favorite book, Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles,* a collection of linked stories about, most memorably, the narrator's mad father. Rather than ghosting the words he wanted to erase, as Bervin did, he physically removed them to write a story that, instead of skipping forward and backward through time (as *The Street of Crocodiles* does), focuses on one day. Here the exclusion is not a matter of arbitrary formalism but the very heart of the book's meaning: after the Germans seized Drohobycz, Schulz's hometown, in 1941, he distributed his art and papers—which are believed to have included his unpublished novel, *Messiah*—to his gentile friends for safekeeping. The next year, a Gestapo officer killed Schulz on the street. He was sixty years old, and the bulk of his unpublished creative work has never been recovered. Only two slim story collections—*The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*—survive. Foer writes in his afterword, "Schulz's surviving work evokes all that was destroyed in the War: Schulz's lost books, drawings and paintings; those that he would have made had he survived; the millions of other victims, and within them the infinite expressions of infinite thoughts and feelings taking infinite forms." The holes in *Tree of Codes* intensely, persistently remind you that something is missing. You can peer through them to see words, sometimes entire sentences, printed pages later. No longer solid and immutable, words on page 44 are now neighbors with words on page 59. From page 15, you can read a sentence printed on page 29: "I heard the windows shake." Foer turned Schulz's songful sentences of prose into piercing lines of poetry. Using Schulz's own words, Foer writes, "The last secret of the tree of codes is that nothing can ever reach a definite conclusion." His words encapsulate the genre: erasure is never final.



Sonnet 44 from Jen Bervin's Nets, *2004. Image courtesy of Ugly Duckling Presse.*

Because the "original" is partially present in an erasure but entirely present somewhere else, some readers may find erasures, especially ones as visual as Foer's, inauthentic. In his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin explains the concept of "aura," writing that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity." Printed in Belgium, die-cut in the Netherlands, hand-finished in Belgium, bound in the Netherlands, and published by Visual Editions, a London-based book publisher, *Tree of Codes* has been mass-produced, though each copy—with the physical removal of select words—gives the illusion of being the original.

Ironically, the first English translation of Benjamin's essay is inauthentic because it contains a (maybe) accidental erasure. First published by Jonathan Cape in 1970, and later by a branch of HarperCollins, the English translation is missing twelve words. Their absence collapses two sentences into one that botches a very important point by Benjamin. The last two sentences of Benjamin's original introduction should read, in English: "The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of

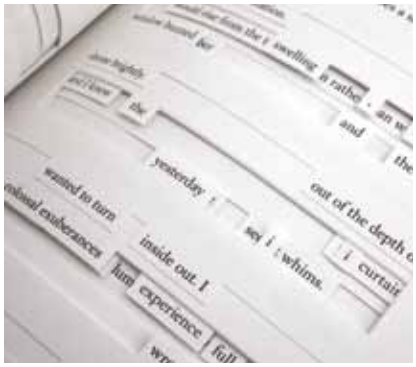
art." However, the words *purposes of fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the* are missing. The resulting sentence is grammatically correct but drastically changes Benjamin's meaning: "The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art."

A mistake in translation, or a typing error? It is impossible to ask the translator, because the translator's name, strangely, remains unmentioned.

VII.

For some erasurists, the method is to begin with a minor model—an inadequate or middling book—and then, absorbing its nutrients, give birth to a better book. Ruefle did this, and the result was extraordinary. Other erasurists select a literary work they want to engage with rather than improve. In *Tree of Codes,* Foer erases Schulz's words to write, "The tree of codes was better than a paper imitation." It is not an imitation, but a new work that speaks to the "original" without imitating it.

The perfect example of engaging with a book some might consider impossible (or unethical) to improve is Thomas Jefferson's erasure of the Bible. In 1804, during the evening hours late in his first term as president, Thomas Jefferson began erasing the Gospel of Matthew. "In the New Testament there is internal evidence that parts of it have proceeded from an extraordinary man," he wrote, "and that other parts are of the fabric of very inferior minds. It is as easy to separate those parts, as to pick out diamonds from dunghills." With the help of a razor blade and six books of the New Testament



Pages from Jonathan Safran Foer's Tree of Codes, *2010. Photograph courtesy of Visual Editions.*

in four different languages (English, French, Greek, and Latin), Jefferson removed the supernatural aspects of the Bible (miracles, angels, the prophecy surrounding Jesus's birth), and anything he believed Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John had misinterpreted. (He does include references to the Great Flood, Noah's Ark, and the Second Coming, as well as to heaven, hell, and Satan.) Next, he collaged fragments together, chronologically arranging excerpts from the separate books of the Four Evangelists, to create one single narrative. To understand the doctrine of Jesus, he wanted to legitimize the Bible's more-believable claims. At times he made quiet edits that he felt would improve the text: for example, he removed the *as* in the construction *for as in a day.* By 1813, he had completed his erasure. He bound the final copy in Moroccan leather, titled it *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth,* and shared it with friends but never allowed it to be published, likely worried that he would again face accusations of being a non-Christian. After he died, it stayed in his family until the Smithsonian purchased it, in 1895, for four hundred dollars. That year, it was displayed at the International Cotton Exposition in Atlanta, and attracted so much attention that the Government Printing Office made lithographic reproductions that, for decades, were given to new congressmen. Commonly referred to today as the Jefferson Bible, it is being studied and conserved at the National Museum of American History. What he once called his "wee little book" is valued for its creative approach to reading the Bible.

The contemporary writer and visual artist Jen Bervin also edited a literary work some may consider it taboo to erase: Shakespeare's sonnets. Rather than seeking to improve the sonnets, Bervin wanted to understand them through erasure. As I fell into [Shakespeare's son]*Nets*, I felt as if my bifocal vision had failed: two poems appear on each page, hers overlapping Shakespeare's but both readily apparent. The conflicting dark and light print and her anxious tone ("I / use / the whole, and yet am I not") deepen the erasure: a young poet's struggle against her masterful forebear becomes an homage to his indispensability.

Cue Harold Bloom. "The largest truth of literary influence," Bloom writes, "is that it is an irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him." Bloom more generally argues that "the poet in a poet" finds inspiration by reading another poet's work, but almost always produces poetry that is derivative of the existing poetry. If poets subscribe to Bloom's theory, they may descend, as Shelley did, into unbearable writer's block. So instead of *derivative,* let's use the word *different*. It is great if a poet improves a work, but I find erasures interesting because their authors make existing books new.

That celebrated directive, the motto of modernism, Ezra Pound's "Make it new" (a translation of Confucius, who borrowed it from Emperor T'ang, who inscribed on his bathtub "Every day make it new"), helped give birth to fresh styles of writing. Indeed, one of the most prominent themes of modernism is the shadowy yet influential character of the forebear. Modernism has been accused of ignoring the past, but really it's about first examining the past and then wiping it out through intense revision as a way to push forward. Modernism could not exist without tradition. The modernists understood that in order to be a great writer, one must first be a great reader. Similarly, Bloom offers hope: only through creatively misreading the old masters can young poets "clear imaginative space" for themselves. Erasurists find their imaginative space by reading creatively.

One of the genre's most creative readers is Srikanth Reddy. Not only is his erasure, the book *Voyager,* conceptually captivating, but the writing is amazing. Let me repeat that: the writing is *amazing.* Here's an excerpt: "As a child, spelling out / *world* was to open a world in myself, private and / byzantine, with mountains by a pale fragile sea, / the coast stretching southwards in the curtained / evening hours."

If you think erasure easily results in writing this good, consider this: *Voyager* took Reddy seven years to produce. When I explain his reasoning and method, you'll understand why.

Its title refers to the *Voyager* spacecraft, which launched in 1977 when Reddy was four years old. A golden record affixed to *Voyager*'s side contained a friendly greeting from Kurt Waldheim, then the secretary general of the United Nations: "We step out of our solar system into the universe seeking only peace and friendship, to teach if we are called upon, to be taught if we are fortunate. We know full well that our planet and all its inhabitants are but a small part of the immense universe that surrounds us and it is with humility and hope that we take this step."

Eight years after his words were sent into space, Waldheim was accused of having served as a Nazi SS officer. He maintained his innocence, but admitted that, as a young member of the military staff, with no authority on the army level, he had known about German reprisals against partisans: "Yes, I knew. I was horrified. But what could I do? I had either to continue to serve or be executed." With that silence in mind, Reddy erased Waldheim's memoir, *In the Eye of the Storm,* which, remarkably, never addresses the scandal surrounding his war years: the memoir itself is a form of erasure.

Crossing out Waldheim's words, sentences, and sometimes whole paragraphs (and preserving the remaining words in their original order), Reddy erased the memoir three times—once for each section of *Voyager.* The first section addresses, with clipped poetic lines, the silence and complicity enmeshed in all of us: "The silent alone lie united," Reddy writes. The second section explores, in the form of prose poems, *Voyager*'s composition and Reddy's own silence and complicity as a scholar opposed to the Iraq war: "As / I write these lines, people with pictures of / fighters killed in action run through New York's / traffic-choked streets, rising to the spirit of the / occasion, while I, sitting in my second-floor / office connected to various communications / cables,

maintain control over some very unruly / emotional forces."

The third section inhabits Waldheim's voice with poems that preserve the spaces left by Reddy's deletions from the memoir: "I was led to a globe, / beholden / to its vast revolution / —a revolution living eyes / could hardly credit— / my life diminishing in scale."

For the rest of his life, Waldheim was praised and vilified. Pope John Paul II awarded him a papal order of knighthood. The U.S. government banned him. But never does Reddy judge Waldheim: "The failed idea repeatedly described in this book," Reddy writes, "is *alter ego.*"

Janet Holmes also used erasure to write a deeply political book. She found a way to write about the Iraq war by erasing the poems Emily Dickinson wrote during (but not directly about) the Civil War. "I couldn't have engaged in this process without a deep reverence for the work of Emily Dickinson," Holmes has said of *The Ms of My Kin* (the title is an erasure of "*The Poems of Emily Dickinson*"). "My intention was to share both her language and her tone in poems that reflect a substantially different war than the one that raged during her lifetime. In my ideal imaginary, a reader would feel compelled to go back to the original poems, and would experience some resonance between the originals and the erasures. I hope the layout of the poems, with Dickinson's originals floating, ghostly, behind them, encourages such reading." Dickinson's poems are already so condensed. Their contours and organizations of sound have about them an air of having been foreordained. Yet Holmes condenses them into succinct descriptions of 9/11: "a feeling / Yesterday / Of Ground / letting go—." Dickinson's capitalization of *Ground* enriches the erasure, linking the described feeling to what physically happened at Ground Zero. This is precisely what makes *The Ms of My Kin* so ambitious.

Another Dickinson devotee (author of *My Emily Dickinson*) and practicing erasurist is Susan Howe. Howe begins her recent

MICROINTERVIEW WITH BETSY COHEN, PART I

THE BELIEVER: What's the difference between a psychic, a clairvoyant, and a medium?

BETSY COHEN: *Psychic* means you're reading someone's aura or getting information from the collective unconscious. A *clairvoyant* can see things. *Medium* means you're speaking to a dead person, so you're getting information filtered through a spirit who was on this Earth plane not too long ago. And they have opinions! So sometimes a mother or grandmother will come in and shake her finger and say, "You better get away from that boy," or "Hold on to that boy," or whatever. But that's not necessarily what source energy would say.

BLVR: And source energy is…?

BC: Spirit, God, infinite intelligence. Whatever you want to call it. Personally, I believe that everything is made of energy and that energy has consciousness. That's about as concrete as I can get.

BLVR: From a scientific perspective, then, I mean, this cup of coffee has energy. Plus, it has milk in it, which has its own energy. So is there consciousness in my cup of coffee?

BC: Yeah, I believe so. But so does this chair, even though it's plastic.

BLVR: So when you say you can "see things," do you mean that you can see what's going on in that building over there, or that you're having visual hallucinations?

BC: Any psychic or medium gets information symbolically through their five senses. Being *clairvoyant* means you see things, *clairaudiant* means you hear things, and so on. I have all five of the "clairs." Generally, you excel in some over others. ✯

collection, *That This,* with a lyric essay that contains a willed erasure of select memories of her deceased husband: "Now—putting bits of memory together, trying to pick out the good while doing away with the bad—I'm left with one overwhelming impression—the unpresentable violence of a negative double." She asks if a trace of something can become the something it traces, "secure as ever, real as ever—a chosen set of echo-fragments?" For the second section of *That This,* Howe used scissors, tape, and a copy machine to collage an eighteenth-century woman's diary: "Even the 'invisible' scotch tape…" Howe observes, "leaves traces on paper when I run each original sheet through the Canon copier." The most powerful absence, she shows us, is visual.

VIII.

After my father died, men removed his body from our home. They left the bed.

Hospice had loaned him the bed to die in. His last days were the only memories the bed offered me. One night I stood in the doorway and imagined him still breathing in his room.

A week later, different men returned and wheeled his last days from our home. I can't decide what filled me with more emptiness: the empty bed, or the empty room.

I wanted to convince you that "to erase is to write," but more than that I want to remind you of my father's absence. He is the reason behind most of what I write, even this.

I have yet to complete the book I promised him nine years ago. Honoring him in a form that removes the blank page makes the endeavor feel possible. Honoring him in a form issuing wholly from loss feels right. To eulogize my father using a method that at once alludes directly to him and reminds one of his absence, all the while describing my feeling of loss: this is why erasure interests me. It is an example of what words are for. ✯

MICROINTERVIEW WITH BETSY COHEN, PART II

THE BELIEVER: Do your abilities ever impede your life in any way?

BETSY COHEN: As I progress and work with my spirit guide, I've said, "OK, *occasionally* you can come into my daily life without me asking." But other than that I keep really strong boundaries up. One of the reasons is that I am a social worker also, and at those times I'm not paid to be a psychic. So I put up a boundary and rely on my intuition without looking into my clients' future or past, or their dead relatives. With my friends, family, potential boyfriends, I also have that boundary up.

Occasionally, something does happen, though. A friend's grandfather might come to me and say, "You need to speak to Sue." Mediums are a little bit like lightning rods, though. You know, sometimes I'm sitting on the subway across from someone, and their aunt comes and tells me, "Tell him to stop eating this, that it's bad for his skin," and I have to say no. Sometimes if they were pushy in life they can be pushy in spirit, so I tell that spirit I'm really sorry, but that's past my boundary. I do not say things to random people on the street. I tell the spirit that if they want to speak to their loved one here on Earth, to get them to a séance or another medium another time.

BLVR: Do people ever come in with problems that are just ridiculous or insane?

BC: You know, the stories that people come in with in readings are nothing compared to what I hear in social work. But also I don't really hear the crazy side of the story. You know, let's say you have this really insane love triangle, and it's just the craziest thing you've ever heard—I don't actually get to hear that story. They come in and say, "What do I do about Jim? And Carol?" That's the most I get. ✯