Erasure as Representation

I. Voyager

The Voyager spacecraft appears more than once in my first book of poems, as what in retrospect seems to me to be a kind of figure for the poetic enterprise:

> **Corruption (II)**
>
> In one of Grimm's stories, a little tailor defeats a giant in a throwing contest by lofting a bird into the air instead of a stone. Happily ever after arrives, but the bird never ends. She flies straight out of the tale. Tonight, a vessel catapults through the heavens with a gold-plated phonograph fixed to its side. In less than forty thousand years this craft will drift through the nearest system, bearing with it greetings in fifty-seven languages, including the encoded song of the humpback whale. By then our tongue will have crossed into extinction or changed utterly no doubt. Lately, I have taken an interest in words like "here." Here was a chapel, for instance. Here is a footprint filling with rain. Here might be enough. Could not the same be said of elsewhere? Yes, I suppose. But I know precious little of elsewhere.

From childhood – I was four years old when Voyager was launched – I've been drawn to the thought of this artifact tumbling deeper and deeper into the night. The fact of it would flash upon my consciousness as I first began to scout out our neighborhood by bicycle, or as I sat in geometry class daydreaming while the snow drifted to earth beyond the schoolroom window. I would, in these moments, find myself startled out of the dream of my own life, overtaken by the sense that I myself was being dreamt by the sleeping vessel as it sailed irretrievably further and further away from home.

When I first came to the University of Chicago, I began to read about the construction of the golden record which is fixed like an ancient medallion to Voyager's side. The record is encyclopedic in its design, ranging from our microbiology to our social forms, our scientific and mathematical language, and our geopolitical world order. In the end, I don't think the makers of this document really intended it for an otherworldly audience. The golden record is a mirror. Like a figure from Ovid, after looking in this mirror and tracing what we've seen upon its surface, we've thrown it upward into the heavens.

One troubling feature of our epistemology is the sense that, for something to be known, it must be *fully* known. The makers of the golden record felt the need to put *everything* in it in order to provide a ground for the human figure. In fact, the makers even felt the need to inscribe instructions on how to play the record upon the surface of the record itself. (They did not, however, include a record player). The compulsion to give a full "representation" of oneself leads to the vertigo of endless reflection.

The danger in this sort of reflection is that it may masterfully allow us to *not* see those aspects of ourselves toward which we wish to remain blind. Ann Druyan, one of the engineers behind the golden record, recalls her first day at CBS Studios, screening the sounds of Earth for inclusion on board Voyager:

> Somewhere in among the wolves and brine shrimp was a heavy lacquer disc of what is believed to be the first field recording ever made during a battle: an ugly repeating loop of a Word War I skirmish in France with an American soldier urging a mustard gas grenade launcher to fire. The soldier's voice seems horribly cheerful and thoughtless, as mechanical a sound as the answering hiccup of the poison canister. It drones at us from across sixty years, and [we] try to see what this man must have been seeing, but all we can manage is bits of war stolen from movies and some smoke.

This recording never made it onto the Voyager phonograph; as Marianne Moore writes in the epigraph to her *Complete Poems*, "omissions are not accidents." So I began thinking about ways of constructing a text of the world which would ultimately revise the Utopian dream of the golden record, representing aspects of our experience which had been placed under erasure by the original document. I found that this process would lead in unexpected directions.

II. Waldheim

In my research for this project, I learned that whoever should someday retrieve this record will be greeted by the voice of Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the United Nations at the time of the Voyager II launch. For those here too young to remember the story, Waldheim headed the organization from 1971 to 1981, presiding over political events such as the Iran hostage crisis, the China-Vietnam War, the emerging dispute between Turkey and Greece over the governance of Cyprus, and various other international incidents which marked the Cold War era. Like other Secretary Generals such as Dag Hammarskjold and Trygve Lie, Waldheim would probably have receded into beatific obscurity following his tenure at the UN, were it not for the fact that several prominent Holocaust researchers eventually accused him of collaboration in genocidal war crimes carried out during the Second World War, when Waldheim served as an intelligence officer for the German Army stationed in the Balkan region – an area which, of course, remains torn by the aftershocks of such violence to this day.

Surprisingly, the ethical shadow of Waldheim provided a way into the problem of composing a new text of our world. While the media – with its inclination toward simplification – has always tended to portray Waldheim as "guilty," the general literature on this affair suggests that Waldheim's guilt or innocence, like that of so many other members of the German Army during

the war, is ultimately unknowable. My own feeling is that Waldheim's principal crime during this period lay in knowing about these atrocities and failing to speak out against them in any meaningful way. His transgression was silence. In this respect, Waldheim's eventual rise to the position of UN Secretary General – as a voice "speaking" for all of humanity – completes the tragic (or is it ironic?) logic of witness in our century.

Carrying within himself the deepening wound of his own silence during the war, the intelligence officer makes it his work to speak – to break silence – on behalf of the world. Not unlike a poet, he speaks *for* the world in order to be *in* the world once again. Of course, here I am speaking about "my" Waldheim – a character, like a character in a novel by Joseph Conrad. But by this late chapter in the unfolding tale, there *is* no Waldheim of whom to speak other than one's own Waldheim, a Waldheim who is, in the end, one's own reflection in the mirror. (I should add parenthetically that, as a writer, I have felt my own silence in the face of our ongoing political history as a kind of self-inflicted wound I must carry within me). In my version of this story, Waldheim – whether guilty or innocent of the charges levelled against him – *must* pay the price of becoming a shadow, the negative image of what stands before the light. Because he can never reveal what he has seen and possibly abetted during the war, his speech must always be 'shot through' with silence. The uncanny logic clicks into place when we consider how Waldheim's speech – roaring with silence – travels, *as I speak these words to you*, on board the Voyager spacecraft bearing greetings from mankind to eternity.

III. Erasure

I began to read Waldheim's memoirs carefully, trying to discover some sort of Truth buried within his autobiography – a document which, remarkably, makes no mention whatsoever of the scandal surrounding his war years. As I did this, I began to imagine various texts (or subtexts) within his memoir, ghostly traces of discourse submerged beneath the surface of Waldheim's own narrative. Perhaps because I was heavily involved with editing and otherwise marking up my students' poems at the University of Chicago at the time, I began to cross out language from Waldheim's autobiography in order to "unearth" a text hidden within his text. To my surprise, I found that what began as an idle experiment with erasure, when applied to a memoir constructed upon the selfsame act of erasure – yielded poetry. Perhaps *subtraction* was a way to construct a new text of the world.

Erasure became, to my mind, a new kind of literary *form.* Moreover, the radical difficulty of this form – crossing out Waldheim's language and preserving the remaining words in their original order, it would take me hours to produce a single sentence that seemed to me "poetic" – this technical difficulty reflected the broad philosophical, emotional, and political difficulties I faced as a person in the world. If ethics and aesthetics are two sides of a single, ancient coin, then the ethical problem of silence in the 20th-Century may provide *the* poetic difficulty of our time.

Here is the result of my first venture into this silencing procedure, a cross-out of the opening chapters of Waldheim's memoirs. Strangely, as you will hear, Waldheim's political language of "representation" and "order" could be retrieved and recuperated beautifully within the sphere of aesthetics:

[read from Book I of *Voyager*]

In the end, I had discovered that erasure is not only a literary form – it is also a philosophical "method" not unlike the subtractions of Descartes' *Method*. The "method" of erasure, when applied as a kind of speculative discipline or meditative practice, can orient one toward an attitude of doubt, or negative capability, from which one might begin to uncover the relations between utterance and silence, appearance and disappearance, self and world. I have come to feel that the world enters into awareness most fully only when its existence is doubted. As a skeptical method, erasure takes away from the world so that the world may reappear, or be seen once again.

So I began the cross-out process all over again; here you'll see that the identical technique applied to the same text yielded an entirely different poem:

[read from Book II of *Voyager*]

So far, I've been speaking to you about silence in relation to the figure of Kurt Waldheim: Waldheim's controversial silence during and after the war years, and my silencing of Waldheim through the erasure of his text. But there is a deeper, "framing" silence which I haven't yet mentioned: that is, my own silence during the composition of these studies. Unlike the normative model of literary composition – which involves projecting one's "inwardness" out into the world – erasure requires that the poet not sing. And yet, as I worked in silence on these studies, I couldn't help feeling that holding my own tongue brought me nearer to the silent *source* of all speech.

Moreover, *repeating* this procedure opened up multiple versions of reality within a single text of the world. I've come to feel that the real interest of this project lies not in any single, "final" version of the world yielded up by the erasure technique, but, rather, in the *repetition* of the process.

The seemingly inexhaustible variety of texts within Waldheim's story doesn't hollow out the possibility of an "authentic" account of the world. Rather, in the end, I discovered that these multiple versions of reality yielded a negative image of myself. Just as Waldheim was a shadow haunting my imagination, I began to see my own silhouette embedded within Waldheim's purgatorial words:

[read from Book III of *Voyager*]

A friend of mine recently wrote to me about the cave paintings in the Dordogne, where humanity first enters into representation via negative space: "the hand was put against the stone, and then the ink spewed from the mouth to outline the splayed fingers. The hand appears by outlining the absence of the hand. We see it by knowing it's gone." It is not such a long way from Lascaux and Altamira to Voyager.