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Writing out of the (never) Was and into the May (never) be...

A Reading of Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* and Jen Bervin's *Nets*

Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* and Jen Bervin's *Nets* articulate a particularly powerful vision of what I am going to call erasure poetics as performative writing. These texts challenge socially-sanctioned histories of reception, betraying the construction of female conduct and Shakespearean sexuality (respectively) as unnecessary fictions stuck in the "as is." Both Ruefle's and Bervin's texts operate in the liminal space of "what if." What if, for example, a modern woman erases the moral subjectivity from an eighteenth century conduct manual? What if a twenty-first century poet palimpsests the autobiography and erotic love from Shakespeare's sonnets? What if writing *acts* to transform the thingness of the text –from fact to fragment, from argument to negotiation, from imperative to promise? What if writing *moves* – faster than the structures that seek to fix it in place? What if writing, as Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, destroys "the dual relation of I to I... so as to allow another world to rebuild (keep on unbuilding and rebuilding) itself with debris" (23)? What if, by insisting on "what if," erasure demonstrates that meaning is not only producible but re-producible, coexisting in the always already and in the may (never) be? With one foot in the past and one foot in the present, erasures like *A Little White Shadow* and *Nets* embrace and betray the bias of subject position; through erasure, the texts perform the production of *I* while simultaneously refusing the necessary average clarity of a singular, gendered self. Moreover, as erasures both *A Little White Shadow* and *Nets* explicitly interrogate the historical production of what Judith Butler calls a binary frame for thinking about the gendered subject (*Gender*

Trouble vii).

My argument here is not, however, predicated on similarity but rather upon difference. Though similarity (Both texts erase, make fragment.) makes conversation between the two texts possible, their difference enables this useful excursion into the generative possibilities of performative writing. *A Little White Shadow* and *Nets* move; this is the essence of their performativity. However, they move in opposite directions. Ruefle's erasure moves *out* of the centre, from conduct literature's ever narrowing corset into a liminal space in which it is possible to interrogate the relationship between language and the sexed, gendered body. Bervin's erasure, on the other hand, moves *in* from the margins (experimental contemporary women's writing) to the centre (the Shakespearean sonnets) to demonstrate that it is in fact possible to go back to the beginning, to resurrect – despite all our valiant and misguided attempts at forgetting – a time when, even within canonical conversations, subject position was not defined by gender. The contrast between the two texts epitomizes the subversive potential of performative writing not as an ethical commitment to a particular political agenda but rather as a refusal to identify with a singular subject position and as a commitment to negotiation. Performative writing is not for argument; it is not for moralizing; it is not for the margins; it is not for the centre; it is not for arriving at one side or the other. If performative writing is, as Della Pollock asks, for love, it is for love of doing, of becoming, of shifting, of making a promise, as Peggy Phelan suggests, not merely to walk on but to *live* “on the rickety bridge between self and other” (*Unmarked* 174).

Paper on Fire: Writing out of Etiquette

Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* is a slender, unassuming volume, bearing only the title and author's name on its cover. Ruefle's desecration of the original hides in plain sight; over tea-stained and age-burnt pages, the *Wite Out* is merciless and appears haphazardly applied, at times completely obfuscating the original, at others allowing white-smearred ghosts to surface and re-submerge. With its competing visual contexts (completely obliterated, partially obliterated,

and unobliterated) *A Little White Shadow* is true to its title, operating at the level of shadow: self-consciously partial, shifting beneath the writer's hand and the reader's gaze, simultaneously uncovering and recovering, restless, transient, and transitive. The interplay of absence and presence in Ruefle's erasure presents the text as fragmentary, a partial and incomplete rendering that, self-consciously, acknowledges its participation in history's "larger" conversation on the proper articulation of the female body in the public sphere.

Centuries of etiquette and conduct manuals have emphasized the domestic and the performative as the universal discourses of womanliness. The "domestic angel in the house," always on display, conscious of social standards, strives to appear "natural": serene, efficient, and empathetic despite the pressures of the everyday (Vickers ix; Foster 9). The writer of an etiquette manual such as *The Little White Shadow* would, typically, assume a dominant and authoritarian stance, adopt an omniscient tone, speak in sweeping declarative statements, pose rhetorical questions, and then provide answers clearly and glibly, as if everyone should already know the one possible correct answer (Foster 2).

Ruefle's erasure *Wites Out* the text's orderly, edifying statements, reduces its prose to the chaos of poetry, and (parodying the dominant and authoritarian stance of etiquette writers) embodies the potential of the performative to liberate. Through the disfiguration of grammar, syntax, connection, and connotation, Ruefle's text shifts conduct from documentary to constitutive and from collective to individual. Reading along with her, hyper-conscious of limitation, readers literally experience this objectification as the relentless pressure of the *Wite Out* on the text. Ruefle's revision thus re-privileges the agency of the readers: liberated from the submissive forms of reception imposed by the student /teacher model, their readings are given equal potential to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct.

Ruefle's erasure juxtaposes late nineteenth century anxieties surrounding the liberated behaviours of lower class, working girls against contemporary (and perhaps, because less overt, more dangerous) anxieties about the public actions

of a professional woman (an academic and a poet). Her actions, moreover, transform not only the body of the text but also the readership of the text. Originally, the text would have been read by uneducated, poor, young women. Ironically, Ruefle's target audience is undeniably bourgeois-esque in comparison. Her book appeals to a limited readership of educated men and women, composed primarily of poets and scholars. Her text will not be mass-produced and it will not be sold in popular venues such as Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Chapters. The manual's revised life in the present moment will be limited, marginal, and shadow-y. Ruefle's work thus dramatizes the limits of subversion to material, mass appeal and successful commodification. Furthermore, it re-enacts the loss of individuality and agency experienced by late nineteenth century working girls who, though empowered to work outside the home, were powerless to thwart their objectification as a public image and a metonymic representation of society's anxieties over the female body.

Throughout Ruefle's reconstructed lyric the performative subject is constituted as a dynamic engagement between linguistic articulation and textual embodiment. Subjectivity lingers in memories and little books and thus is predicated upon past constructions – of gender, conduct, genius, artists and their quarrels... Ruefle's erasure underscores the importance of remembering and revising, of doing rather than arriving, releasing rather than possessing: “seven centuries of... sobbing... /gathered... in the... /twilight... /and... /had their... /pages... /wandered... through” (8). As Pollock writes, “Identity cannot escape its discursive construction in/as iteration but, through performance, it may exert a counterpressure” (92). In Ruefle's lyric, the counterpressure is language, a Janus-like product of human endeavors that, both created and creating, refuses to obey paradigms of domination and subservience. Erasure liberates the language from making things happen, allowing the written word to float free of the human referent and pass into a space beyond normative distinctions of self and other, male and female, human and animal:

on the German piano... /birds were singing... /in the language... /which some believe
he wrote after he drew the portrait of her... /Ren-/dered into English... /this was
something of its meaning: paper... /on... /fire (34-5).

Birds sing “his” language, which can only be partially rendered into the language of the text and its readers, and then, only hyperbolically, fragmentarily, hailing loss and defying commodification: “paper /on /fire.” This fragment foreshadows the essence of the performative: a burning, violent release from objectification, a flame throwing its heat and light out from the disintegrating centre and into nothing-ness, where re-generation is possible. As embodied in *A Little White Shadow*, performative writing is not a promise; it is the act itself. As Ruefle writes: “having once caught sight of /a letter /God changed” (41).

A Weed of Small Worth: Writing into the Canon

Jen Bervin’s *Nets*, or *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare*, is a demure companion to Ruefle’s *A Little White Shadow*. While Ruefle’s use of *Wite Out* is exuberantly rebellious and hyperbolically masculine, Bervin’s palimpsests are well-behaved, generous, and understated: feminine. Bervin’s nets, in fact, are particularly sensitive to the craftsmanship – the performative potential – of the original. Shakespeare’s sonnets hover in their entirety in a light grey type around Bervin’s poetry, cradling the emboldened words that comprise her poems within a ghost-like embrace. Her erasure thus resurrects reading /writing as a romantic engagement amongst the textual artifact, the sixteenth-century Bard, and the contemporary reader – at once Bervin herself (a female and a poet) and Bervin’s own readers. It is crucial to remember here that, unlike Ruefle’s erasure, *Nets* does not force a forgotten text into the present. Rather, it challenges popularly held assumptions about that peculiar, mistreated text: the Shakespearean Sonnets.

It is likewise crucial to keep in mind that poetry is essentially performative. Moreover, poetry’s performativity is not merely a given, an always already. Rather, it is a may (be), contingent on the transaction between reader and writer. That is, the performative in poetry depends on reception. Though Shakespeare’s sonnets are inherently performative – they promise, they do – they have not been received as such and thus have been limited to argument, to arrival, to narrative determinism.

Defiant of the Sonnets' long history of misappropriation, Bervin's *Nets* treats the sonnets as poems: linguistic acts that cannot be paraphrased under the rubrics of argumentation and narration. In the working note that concludes the text, Bervin writes that her intent is "to make the space of the poems open, porous, possible – a divergent elsewhere" (np). The essence of Bervin's erasure is precisely this transparency and generosity, the poet's willingness, as both writer and reader, to exist within rather than, as her masculine predecessors, to exist against, instead, despite, or outside. Butler argues that "the critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities" but rather to affirm local possibilities of intervention and subversive repetition (*Gender Trouble* 147). Bervin's erasure embodies Butler's argument; Bervin moves her own perspective – undeniably feminine and thus undeniably other – from the margins and into poetry's most famously constructed, canonically sanctified identity, the billboard of the Bard.

By reconstructing her "I" within the already signified, the pre-owned, Bervin challenges readers to renegotiate their assumptions about the distinctions between masculine and feminine, past and present, tradition and experimentation. Bervin's resurrections can be read as any number of utterances: hers, Shakespeare's, the reader's, or merely the poem's. As Bervin writes in Sonnet 2, ownership *becomes*, fluid and negotiable: "a weed of small worth /asked /to be new made" (2). Bervin's ungendered weed, moreover, challenges the largely unsubstantiated assumptions about gender that have sprouted from Edmund Malone's 1780 decision to divide the sonnets by the gender of the addressee: the first 126 to the fair youth and the remainder to the dark lady.

Sonnet 20, notoriously titillating and often cited in debates about Shakespeare's homoeroticism, is reconstructed along similarly gender-ambivalent lines. The painted, false woman and the controlling man, subjects of so much moralizing, fade into the background while "master-mistress of my /shifting /by /adding /nothing" is emboldened. "Master-mistress of my" implies that the subjectivity of *I* resides in the dash between masculine and feminine. "My," however, also reads forwards: "my /shifting /by adding nothing" suggests that the first person is not a

stable subjectivity but rather, as Elspeth Probyn argues, a process that must be represented as proceeding through experience (3). Moreover, the performance of subjectivity in Bervin's poem is distinctly uncommodifiable; the "shifting" is qualified by "adding nothing" and thus the gift holds promise because it is neither given nor taken, because it remains *a state of potential* and *act of capacity for*.

Bervin's emboldened text, in fact, repeatedly emphasizes instability and negotiation, the "what if" rather than the "as is." The "dark lady sonnets" begin and end with becoming: "so our becoming /says" and "that bright /becoming of things" (127, 150). Additionally, sonnet 127, typically read as Shakespeare's shift of allegiance from a fair master to a dark mistress, erases all reference to gender; the only emboldened pronoun is an inclusive "our." Moreover, "our" is predicated on a marked lack of identification: "beauty /borrowed /no name, no bower, /so our becoming /says" (127). As Phelan argues, such writing is performative because it "enacts the death of the 'we' that we think we are before we begin to write" (*Mourning Sex* 17).

Gendered pronouns are markedly absent from the remainder of Bervin's *Nets*; the final thirteen poems identify, for the most part, with the first person singular. Nonetheless, Bervin's *I* refuses a singular subjectivity: "I have seen roses /no such roses" is followed by "I /use /the whole, and yet I am not" (130, 134). Bervin erases the following poem, sonnet 135, to a single word "will," repeated thirteen times, seven capitalized and six lower-case. Without a referent, the word "will" takes on every possible meaning, from desire to intention to consent to command to distraction to affirmation to disposal to entreaty. Playing on the complex history of both the word will and the bard Will, Bervin's poem challenges the obsessively singular and gains strength from, as Bervin writes in sonnet 150, "that bright /becoming of things /in the very refuse /such strength." As *A Little White Shadow*, *Nets* insists on the in-between, on the rickety back-slash where doing becomes a promise of the possible, the enactment, as Phelan writes, "of belief in a better future" (*Unmarked* 150).

A Doing in the Present Tense: Writing from the Rickety Bridge

I posit erasure poetics as performative because I want to trouble notions of clarity and to argue for a revival of writing that undermines commodifiable categories of “usefulness.” Erasure poetics like Bervin’s and Ruefle’s necessarily exists on the margins of “useful” and thus fails within the framework of contemporary notions of productivity and commodification. Practically speaking, erasure poetics is not market-able nor is it mass-producible. Its appeal is not readily apparent; we must invest ourselves in living with rather than walking through such texts. We must not fear failure; we must not fear death. We must not be afraid to teeter on that rickety bridge, the backlash.

I speak now as a poet rather than as a critic; as a poet I not only appreciate, I crave the dangerous, the difficult, the marginal. I recognize, however, that it is time to speak from the centre, that it is time contemporary poetic practices like erasure become a doing in the present tense rather than a fanciful and utopic exercise in the speculative conditional. I believe that resituating texts like *A Little White Shadow* and *Nets* within the discourse of the performative offers an opportunity to re-evaluate why such writing matters and how it can, in fact, serve a useful social function, shattering cultural normatives that insist on worn-out, misappropriated dichotomies such as male/female, writer/reader, narrative/lyric, and writer/critic and refiguring a dynamic relationship with language in which the written word becomes a beginning rather than an ending, a continual discovery, and a promise of writing ourselves out of the (never) was and into the may (never) be.

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