**Matt Trease on Erasure**

Sometime around 2009 or 2010, while doing research into non-mainstream spiritual movements like Theosophy and the 4th Way, I happened to find a high-resolution scan of a fundamentalist Christian pamphlet from the 1980s titled “88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988.” It’s by a former NASA scientist turned Christian, and the title is fairly self-explanatory – he was, as in a long line of doomsday prophets, predicting the date of the Second Coming of Christ.

What’s remarkable about this text is that in the spring/summer of 1988, while most of the US was caught up in a race-to-the-bottom presidential election, I was trying to reconcile the world ending before I even hit puberty. I had grown up in a fundamentalist Christian community that was quite closed off from the rest of the world, save for our cable television subscription, and weekly VHS rentals. My dad was often caught up in many of the increasingly politicized evangelical movements that sprang up in the wake of Reagan’s election, and in the spring 1988, he happened upon a copy of *88 Reasons*. For 8 or 9 months, it was all the men in our church talked about, scrutinizing abstract dream imagery and allegory from the *Revelation of St John* and *The Book of Daniel*, and reading those and the current events of the time through the lens of this seemingly meticulous list of reasons. They were so sure the world was ending, Jesus was coming back, and that they would be vindicated, proven right to all the naysayers and sinners. My dad even told his boss not to expect him back after Rosh Hashanah that year. As an 11-year old, though, I had mixed feelings. I had still not ever driven a car, or had a job, gone on a date, or had any of the autonomy you dream of as a growing person still dependent on their parents and beholden to their rules and structures. While I knew I was supposed to be excited for the end of the world, I actually felt more resentful. When Jesus didn’t return as the book promised, the tone and fervor of the men in our church died down a bit, but I was relieved.

When I found that text again, 20-so years later, I no longer considered myself a Christian. I had gone to college, earned a Master’s degree in English, moved cross-country twice, had a child, and was past exams for a Ph.D. I was in the process of dropping out of. I had considered myself a poet, an experimental one at that, so I knew I wanted to do something with the text of this book. I just wasn’t sure what, so I saved the file on my computer. A few years later, while thumbing through my files to put them in the cloud, I rediscovered the pdf I had saved. I knew I wanted to speak back to the way in which, as that 11-year old boy, I had felt my hopes and dreams and contributions were made pointless by the rigid, hyper-linear ideology of the text (indeed of a lot of Manichean Christianity). Basically, I felt the desire driving the text was to erase me, and people like me (including most non-believers, Jewish peoples, LGBTQI folks, and people of color), from existence, so I decided to give it a taste of it’s own medicine and erase it.

Erasure is a poetic method that takes previously printed text and subjects it to a type of censorship, not unlike what happens with classified government documents. The basic idea is that you take white-out, a sharpie, colored pencils, pens, ink, paint, strips of paper, what have you, and obscure large chunks of the text until it becomes a new thing entirely. It could be one-off poems, as you see in the haiku-like aphorisms of [Mary Ruefle](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-ruefle) or you could do an entire book like Tom Phillip’s [A Humament](http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/humument) or Matthea Harvey and Amy Jean Porter’s [Of Lamb](https://www.under-erasure.com/artists-writers/matthea_harvey/), or a more conceptual erasure like Srikanth Reddy’s [Voyager](https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520268852/voyager). It can be great exercise for learning how to take imaginative leaps in a poem, or how say things askant. You really have to tune in, like a radio, to what’s on the page, so that you can hear voices other than the author’s persona or narrator, etc.

Keep in mind, though, even though this is considered “fair use” in terms of copywrite law, this method of making poems is, as the name says, an act of erasure. You still want to be very cautious and ethical about who, what, and how you erase as a text, particularly if you aim to publish. For instance, you wouldn’t want to, as Kenneth Goldsmith did in 2015, [erase or rearrange the autopsy of a black teen (Michael Brown) killed by the cops](https://hyperallergic.com/190954/kenneth-goldsmith-remixes-michael-brown-autopsy-report-as-poetry/), in order to seem relevant and edgy. Keep in mind who you are in relation to your source and try to avoid objectifying an already disenfranchised person. It’s almost always best to come to the text with awe and reverence for the power of language and avoid simple ridicule and irony.

When I began my erasure of *88 Reasons*, I knew I needed to walk a tightrope. The perspective I brought to the text at mid-life was quite different from the one I had at 11. The older me not only recognized all the not-even-so-subtle misogyny and racism that permeated the text and its driving logic but was appalled by it. It was hard to not to turn the project into a Daily Show-type gloss, but to stoop to that level would also ridicule and mock my own inner 11-year-old who was much more complex than a political caricature. Thank Goddess, I recognized that power dynamic from the get-go, because it allowed me to tune into imagery and concepts that were far richer than a hackneyed reaction to closed-mindedness. That’s not to say that there aren’t biting critiques of the text’s worldview that emerged, but that the overall movement was toward a new way of conceiving the divine and time, in a way that showed respect an honor to the curiosity that fueled my complex pre-teen emotional reactions.

As for the writing, I started with some regular sized prinouts of the text. Treating each page as its own poem, I began taking a pen to scour for images and phrases that jumped out to me. Once I had a few, I began looking for connective tissue, phrases and words, that tied one main image to the next. As these were poems and not an essay, I paid more attention to sound than I did to sense and everyday syntax. I let nouns and adjectives become verbs and vice-versa. I even atomized the text, erasing parts of words, to make new words that didn’t exist on the page. The whole process felt a lot like playing with a Ouija Board, allowing the pen, like a pointer to illuminate the hidden code of the text. The finished drafts looked like a crazy word-finder puzzle from a kids magazine.

Once I had made a few passes at the text with a pen, I then turned to some high-resolution 11”x17” printouts. My material of choice was White-Out, a type of liquid paper used to make corrections on typewriter and/or signed documents. I went with that because of the symbolism of the text’s latent White Supremacist view of history. Basically, I wanted to white-out the white-washing. I took my draft and made another pass at refining the text. Whiting out is a lot like painting, and so I my sloppiness at times altered my plan for the text. I tried to roll with mistakes as much as possible, but there were times, I had to wait for the paint to dry, and then scrape at spots to unbury the hidden text. This gave the text a kind of palimpsest feel, like an excavated papyrus with all the overwritten corrections and obfuscations that occurred to ancient texts over time. In the end the pages became more like poetry paintings.

In order to more effectively read the poems for performance, and with an eye toward eventually publishing them, I then took the whited out texts and translated them back into an electronic document. At first, I hand-typed them back into a Word document, trying my best to approximate the spacing on the page, but this was labor-intense and inexact. Later I discovered that Adobe Acrobat Pro was able to convert the image files to text accurately. There was even a tool that allowed me to hide the text I wanted to erase. This gave me two text-based versions of the poem – one that retained the look and layout of the poems in sheets I whited out and one that I could manipulate into more standard poem layouts. This makes for more flexibility when I want to submit the pieces for publication in journals and anthologies.

It’s been four years since I actually started erasing the text, and I’m nearing the end of the project. The entire book is 120 pages of material, and I’ve more than once taken a break to try and refine and adapt my method to the particular layouts and content within the book. I’m still amazed at how the erasure method allowed me to engage my intuition in writing, and to find a way to speak both from my current vantage point, as well as from that 11-yr old kid who had a strong desire for the world to go on, to not be erased but transformed into a new place with more possibilities. In that way, maybe the rapture really did happen, only not the way the text imagined.

Text, whiteboard

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A close up of a piece of paper

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A picture containing indoor, sitting, sink, room

Description automatically generated

A picture containing sitting, wooden, table, side

Description automatically generated

A picture containing indoor, sitting, box, wooden

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