

## Vision and Revision in Percival Everett's *Erasure*

Françoise SAMMARCELLI  
Université Paris Sorbonne

Behold the invisible!  
(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, quoted in Percival Everett's *Erasure*, p. 212 & 219)

Why can't we imagine a transparent white?  
(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*)

Anything we take for granted, Mr. Everett means to show us, may turn out to be a lie (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2013)

Published in 2001, *Erasure* is a highly reflexive novel in which Percival Everett engages in an ironical dialogue with literary and artistic traditions. It is worth remembering that this prolific writer is also a painter, a fact which shows in the many references to the visual arts and pictures in the novel. In many respects *Erasure* is a story both of vision and of revision, in individual and collective terms. As its title makes clear, the book is concerned with corrections and disappearance, with whatever is deleted and replaced, reappropriated or forgotten.

An erasure can be both an act or an instance of erasing, and the place or mark, as on a piece of paper, where something has been erased. To some extent this programmatic tension is epitomized in the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* discussed by Rauschenberg and de Kooning in a dialogue on p. 227-228:

*Rauschenberg: Your drawing is gone. What remains is my erasing and the paper which was mine to begin with. [...]*

*de Kooning: You sold my picture?*

*Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing. (p. 228)*

Part of this dialogue may be fictional, but it has historical basis and is inspired by a very controversial work, often considered as a protest against abstract expressionism. The *Erased de Kooning Drawing* hinges on the inter-relatedness of destruction and creation ("additive subtraction" according to Jasper Johns [p. 27]), and, with it, Rauschenberg claimed he wanted to "find a way to bring drawing into the all-whites" (Grandlund 1997). In my view it could provide a fitting emblem or metaphor for Everett's novel.

Playing with a dynamics of revision on several intertextual and intersemiotic levels, *Erasure* denounces the conventions of representation (including representations of "black" identity and black voices) and addresses the ambiguous issue of political correctness. Its protagonist is a post-structuralist black writer, Thelonius Ellison aka Monk, whose novels do not sound black enough for the publishing industry, and the story weaves together several threads, as Ellison watches his family disintegrate and goes through a major crisis in his writing life. On the one hand, when his physician sister is killed by an anti-abortion activist, he has to leave his quiet California life to look after his mother who is suffering from Alzheimer's. On the other hand, enraged by the success of a fake "ghetto novel", he writes a parody under a pseudonym, only to find that the parody is taken for the real thing and acclaimed as a masterpiece, with absurd consequences. *Erasure* is thus both haunted by the specter of oblivion and very critical

of contemporary creation and culture as embodied by the opportunist commercialisation of literature. In a sense the novel replaces the motif of invisibility denounced in Ralph Ellison's text by that of media overexposure, and indeed both the embedded fiction *My Pafology* and *Erasure* end with their protagonist facing the camera.

Rather than dwelling on the status of the richly parodic and already much-commented *My Pafology*, which I have analysed in a previous essay (Sammarcelli 2010), I will focus on the fragmentary quality of Thelonius Ellison's journal itself and its questioning of Western culture. What is it that we (need to) remember? Is culture what remains when one has forgotten everything? How do we make sense of our experience? It is worth examining how this brilliant novel compels its reader to change perspective and revise some of his/her interpretive strategies.

Forewarned is forearmed. Early in the text the parody of Barthes' *S/Z* in Ellison's conference paper "F/ V: Placing the experimental novel" (p. 14-17) teaches the reader a lesson in modesty and caution. This metatext on a metatext, in which Ellison purports to analyse the first lines of *S/Z* by applying the five Barthesian codes, shocks his fellow-academics while evincing great critical acumen. As he concludes, "A reiteration of the obvious is never wasted on the oblivious" (p. 17). Is there a key to be found, or a way through the maze?

### **I. Fragments and (re)visualisation:**

In *Erasure* the journal format, acknowledged right from the beginning, allows the writer to explore the esthetics of fragmentation and to play with contextual effects, thus dismembering and re-membering the narrative. It offers its narratee various angles from which to reconsider the real and illustrates Everett's propensity for assembling unlike elements. Memories of Ellison's father and scenes of family life, lists, letters (like those found in his father's private papers) are juxtaposed with passages devoted to the narrator's hobbies (fishing, woodworking), his ideas for novels, a TV show, his meditations, etc. From half a line to a few pages, these individualized sections convincingly mimic the whimsical lay-out of a journal, but fragmentation also contributes to destabilize the reader, preventing him or her from getting used to a specific tone or type of rhetoric. The TV show section, for instance, "À propos de bottes" (p. 169-178) is deeply disturbing both for its intra- and extradiegetic audiences (indeed, by the time the black contender, who knows all the answers, finally wins the game, everybody in the audience is dead<sup>1</sup>).

Admittedly the embedded novel *My Pafology* evinces conventional continuity, the better to highlight the brutal quality of the parody in which ghetto novels like Sapphire's *Push* meet Richard Wright's *Native Son*. By contrast the rest of the text explores forms of heterogeneity and discontinuity, typographically enhanced by the blanks and the recurrent three crosses separating the entries, as by the use of different fonts, bold types and italics.

Nothing quite escapes reflexivity, not even the blanks. In *Erasure* these space breaks are actually both employed and commented on in the beginning of chapter 6:

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<sup>1</sup> The dark humour of the section partly resides in the contrast between the amazing erudition displayed by Tom, the black candidate, and the crass ignorance evinced by the white candidate.

There may be space breaks between paragraphs of texts, between lines of text, sentences or words of the text. That these spaces have some kind of narrative significance or charge is not arguable, though the weight of such import might be, and most times is, infinitesimal. What is more interesting is the fact that narrative always travels in the same direction and so the spaces, the negative or white spaces travel the same way. Never are we dropped into a space and returned to the previous narrative position or into nothingness (p. 52)

Whose voice is this? Who is theorizing about the status of the blanks and cautiously addressing us? The passage alludes to the temporal, one-directional dynamics of the narrative, but the blanks and the transgressive typography also draw the reader's attention to the visual quality of the page. Interestingly, in this section the blanks do not point to erased material but introduce distance between words, isolating some of them—"significance", "or", "white"—and making them more "visible" by redefining the foreground/background effect.

Elsewhere, when words *are* actually erased, like the censored word "Fuck" during the TV reading of an excerpt of *My Pafology*, the use of beeps comically reminds the audience of what is missing, all the more so as these beeps, printed in bold type, dramatically stand out on the page. This erasure remains an act that makes us see the materiality of the page (p. 249-251).

The blanks separating paragraphs somehow mimic the loss of memory which increasingly affects Ellison's mother and which Ellison records in sober, touching words. However the text seems to make up for this loss by creating a kind of echo chamber. Indeed one cannot but be struck by the complexity and range of intertextuality which allows Everett to establish a particular relation of complicity with his reader-partner. Thus much of the text can be read like a collage of comments and quotations in several languages, some of which circulate and are repeated, like the "Behold the invisible!" quote from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Everett p. 212, 219). However it should be noted that the text does not mention the source of its "genuine," semi-clandestine quotations (like the one from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* "all propositions are of equal value" on p. 42, or Ralph Ellison's "But somehow the floor had turned to sand" on p. 264), while conversely various fictional exchanges and opinions are attributed to famous figures.

As could be expected, the multiple layers that give the whole a "built-up-from-pieces feel" (according to Darryl Pinckney in *The Guardian*) do not preclude thematic echoes and resonances between the pieces. Content sometimes migrates from one fragment to another: thus the imagined dialogue between Wilde and Joyce (p. 186) comes after memories of a conversation between Ellison and his father about *Finnegans Wake*. Likewise a dialogue between Motherwell and aging Rothko, who is depressed and announces he plans to commit suicide (p. 155), is followed by Ellison's reflexive comments and doubts about his own art, as he considers his potential mistake: "maybe I have misunderstood my experiments all along, propping up, as if propping up is needed, the artistic traditions that I have pretended to challenge" (p. 155-156). Earlier the narrator indulged in cultural reminiscences while visiting the National Gallery, and reacted to the same technique (the use of a housepainter's brush for feathery effects) chosen by Rothko:

I thought of Cocteau and his saying that everything can be solved except being, this while staring at a Motherwell that both seduced and offended me. I stopped at a late Rothko, the feathery

working of the brush, the dark colors, the white edges and I thought of death, my own death, my making my own death. I could not think like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry that death was a thing of grandeur. (p. 139)

While seemingly contemplating death, that is his own effacement, the narrator seems to overcode an intertextual-intersemiotic program. Roles gradually merge, as the writer voices his feelings as a reader, but also as a viewer of other works, paying tribute to a tradition without really resorting to ekphrasis.

Moreover, the serious reflexive quality of various journal entries that record Ellison's feelings or the evolution of his mother's Alzheimer's disease is counterpointed by the ironic or fanciful tone of other fragments, fables, aphorisms ("There are as many hammers as there are saws. A misplaced thumb knows no difference" [p. 181]), ideas for stories (p. 19, p. 30) or even for novels like "*The Satyricon*" (p. 134).

Now this reference may be more relevant than it sounds at first. We only have fragments of Petronius's *Satyricon* which Fellini's film brilliantly reappropriated: only parts of two books remain of this once huge picaresque novel, a medley of prose and verse,—hence it could function as a kind of alternative model. Interestingly *Erasure* subverts or reverses the dynamics of satire itself: whereas Petronius's text focuses on the comic adventures of three disreputable young men in the taverns and low haunts of Campania in Nero's time, Ellison's planned "retelling of *The Satyricon*" (as he puts it later [p. 165]) seems more concerned with an intellectual debate on literary topics, rhetorics and academic training, thus ironically substituting intellectual themes for mundane ones, so that the paradoxically comic effect is a matter of context: "Let us put this affrontery behind us. This from Fabricus Veiento, and he laughed in the middle of his lecture on the follies of what we took generally to be religious belief..." (p. 134)

When reshuffling the comic and the didactic in this true Menippean way, the passage shows its transgressive play with context and thus draws the reader's attention to the frame and the hidden volume under or around the exposed surface. More literally, Ellison reflects on aesthetic space and tries to situate the work of art (as it occupies or fills it)—hence, for him, a different hierarchy:

Only appearances signify in visual art. At least this is what I am told, that the painter's work is an invention in the boundless space that begins at the edges of his picture. The surface, the paper or the canvas, is not the work of art, but where the work lives, a place to keep the picture, the paint, the idea. But a *chair*, a chair *is* its space, is its own canvas, occupies space properly. The canvas occupies spaces and the picture occupies the canvas, while the chair, as a work, fills the space itself. This was what occurred to me regarding *My Pafology*. (p. 208)

How does the visual text signify? The parody may be a functional device for its author, but generally speaking the aesthetics of fragmentation is all the more arresting as it is consistent both with a dynamics of carnivalisation and with a more philosophical ambition. In many respects this fragmentation may also imitate the structure of Wittgenstein's philosophical notes and reminders that stage the intercourse of voices: these texts are set as scenes of discourse—interchanges, crossings, and confrontations (especially in Wittgenstein's late or posthumous writings, as those collected in *Culture and Value*). In that context it is worth examining Everett's intriguing use of dialogues.

## II. Dialogues and the problematics of irony and authenticity

One facet of this somewhat Wittgensteinian cultural interchange or encounter is dramatized in several mock-philosophical dialogues scattered throughout the book, from the dialogue between Klee and Barlach (p. 37-38), or between Hitler and Eckhart (extending over two fragments, pp. 38-39) to Tarski and Carnap's two-line-exchange near the end: "*Tarski: Don't I know you? /Carnap: You might*". (p. 262) These often unlikely conversations mostly involve famous writers or artists: painters such as Rothko and Motherwell (p. 155), or Rauschenberg and de Kooning (p. 227-228 in the already-mentioned dialogue) are heard exchanging theoretical views. Some like Klee and Barlach in 1933 (p. 37-38), Klee and Kollwitz (p. 49), Kirchner and Klinger (p. 60) address the condition of art in Nazi Germany; other creators discuss the future of writing (see Wilde and Joyce about voice and story [p. 186]), or the limits of a painting and what viewers make of them (Rothko and Resnais [p. 222]).

This strategy allows Everett to revisit a long tradition, from the Socratic dialogues to the philosophical dialogues written at the time of the Enlightenment (as the genre, illustrated by Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, helped spread new ideas). It also relates to Bakhtin's theory of dialogue as a form embodying the power of discourse to increase understanding of multiple perspectives.

In a sense, these fictional dialogues that change the narrator into a ventriloquist complexify the pleasure of quotation, combining the immediacy of direct speech and the manipulation of cultural references. Indeed these iconic figures raise issues that Ellison is concerned with, such as that of boundaries and authenticity. Resnais' comforting answer to Rothko thus rephrases the central topic of this novel:

*Rothko: I'm sick of painting these damn rectangles.*

*Resnais: Don't you see that you're tracing the painting's physical limits? Your kind of seeming impoverishment becomes a sort of adventure in the art of elimination. The background and the foreground are your details and they render each other neutral. The one negates the other and so oddly we are left with only details, which in fact are not there.* (p. 222)

So far so good, and the reader could agree with this view—except that the filmmaker soon undermines this comfortable rhetoric when he comments: "The idiots are buying it" (p. 222), thus questioning the validity of aesthetic appreciation. Unlike Ralph's father in *Glyph*, Ellison is not "conspicuously seduced, or fooled, by the language he has chosen, though claiming a simple awareness of discourse." (p. 12)

As suggested before, these fragments or dialogues, combining seriousness and comedy, also echo the strategy used in Wittgenstein's writings. Now significantly, the famous philosopher is quoted in a hilarious dialogue with Derrida (who obviously does not fare much better than Barthes in *S/Z*). Wittgenstein asks Derrida a riddle and the ensuing dialogue illustrates the two philosophers' different approaches to language:

*Wittgenstein: Why did Bach have to sell his organ?*

*Derrida: I don't know. Why?*

*Wittgenstein: Because he was baroque.*

*Derrida: You mean because he composed music marked by elaborate and even grotesque ornamentation?*

*Wittgenstein: Well, no that's not exactly what I was getting at. It was a play on words.*

*Derrida: Oh, I get it.* (p. 191-192)

The play on words or carnivalisation is also a matter of distance, of changing lenses, which the text frequently expects from its reader. Wittgenstein wanted to "chang[e] [our] way of looking at things" (1953, note 144), hence the epistemological

priority given to everyday language. How does Ellison (or Everett) (re-)envision his own poetic project? It is worth stressing the fact that the text repeatedly debunks intellectual icons and discourses of authority, thus preserving its opacity.

Indeed several clues suggest that perhaps the content of these exchanges does not always matter, or even that they could function as part of a teasing game. A case in point is the parodically elliptic dialogue between Pollock and Moore (p. 202): “*Pollock: You first / Moore: No, you/ Pollock: No, I insist/ Moore: you/ Pollock: You/ Moore: Very well*”. What form of precedence are these artists negotiating? Does authority lie in a name?

However, the spare dialogue form contaminates the text and allows it to shift from one mode to another. In this respect, the stylisation suggests that dialogues, like lists, are sometimes used as instruments for a narrator trying to erase or limit authorship. Who is in charge? The question is relevant when one considers the “real” conversation between Ellison and his agent Yul (p.158), or that between “Stagg” and his Random House editor about the new title for his novel, *Fuck* (p. 210), or a dialogue between two young doctors at the women’s clinic after Lisa’s death (p. 55).

Even when a reported scene does not explicitly function like a dialogue, the framing of slogans and (mock) rhetorical questions introduces dialogical tension. Somewhat like Candide in Voltaire’s tale, Ellison alias Stagg Leigh plays the part of the naive observer, recording the estranging quality of contemporary life: thus after the meeting with a producer in a posh Washington restaurant:

Stagg found that the world changed for him during the elevator ride down to the lobby and in the lobby he was confronted with a huge poster, a colorful confusion of shapes which asked the question:

**Did Julian Schnabel Really Exist?**

He wandered to a next sign:

**What does the Avante Garde?**

To another:

**One Man’s Graffiti is Another Man’s  
Writing on the Wall**

Stagg was confused, angry. Outside, he scratched the dark glasses from his face and disappeared. (p. 219)

“A colorful confusion of shapes” indeed, making fun of *chic* postmodern culture and a certain taste for paradox. If this is a “game” (p. 212), Everett is having more fun than Stagg Leigh. By dislocating captions or labels (like the “avant-garde”) or redefining one popular form of expression (graffiti), the text both suggests a potential for reactivation and sheds the shadow of a doubt on its own aesthetics. What is sincere, what is not? Why refer to Schnabel in the past tense? Is Schnabel an invention, like Stagg Leigh who disappears when Ellison takes off his sunglasses? Now, Schnabel is an artist and film-maker who directed a film on Basquiat, thus indirectly evincing his interest in the recycling of street art and graffiti. Moreover he is also known for inserting found objects or heterogeneous material in his (polemic) works, just as Everett juxtaposes textual items and Ellison superimposes levels of deception. But how is the text making sense?

### III. Making or unmaking sense: language under scrutiny

Caught or ensnared in these mirror-reflections, the protagonist and the reader share a gradual sense of disconnection. A splitting of identity, redefining the self as other and blurring lines of responsibility, reverberates on the critic confronted with choices, like Ellison who “ha[s] often stared into the mirror and considered the difference between the following statements: / 1) He looks guilty. / 2) He seems guilty. / 3) He appears guilty. / 4) He is guilty.” (p. 207). Fragmentation and dislocation are echoed in the use of the third person narrative for Stagg Leigh’s thoughts from page 210 onwards, instead of the first-person narrative prevalent in the rest of the journal—a strategy that often produces ironical effects: “Thelonius and Monk and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the same seat. I considered that this charade might well turn out of hand and that I would slip into an actual condition of dual personalities.” (p. 237-238)

This laying bare of linguistic rules comes to the foreground when the text experiments with lists, i.e. minimal agrammatical units or decontextualized words. Thus, when Ellison reminisces about his teenage years and his inability to “talk the talk” like his friends, he draws a list of the words and the expressions that he remembers: “*Solid / what’s happenin’. / Chilling’./ Yo. / What it be like?/ What it is? [...]*” (p. 167)— cliché expressions that might bridge the gap between the elegant diction of Ellison’s journal and the parodic ghetto voices of *My Pafology*. Ellison then retrospectively comments on the codes that he felt awkward using, underlining their artificiality: “I’d try, but it never sounded comfortable, never sounded real. In fact, to my ear it never sounded real coming from anyone [...]”, (p. 167).

This defamiliarizing process culminates in the last pages of the novel. Admittedly, the text plays with the paradigm in a predictable form when a list of slang synonyms for penis, printed vertically, is inserted in a self-derogatory sentence: “I had whacked off my own */willy/stick/dick [...]* and now had to pay the price” (p. 257-258). Conversely the next fragment merely consists in a much stranger “list”, introduced as such, without any syntactic framing except for a kind of label: “Another list of keywords (phrases)”. But the reader would be hard put to find the logic of this second list: “*echoes/ dead/ clock / thunder/ obstupefactus/ poached eyes/ arabesque/ nightmaze / Et tu Bruno?/ Species / nocturnal/ cad / C<sub>5</sub>H<sub>14</sub>N<sub>2</sub> [...]*” Not only is it multilingual, juxtaposing English words with Latin ones as “obstupefactus” (which means “amazed”), and a phrase in transliterated Arabic, but it even includes a chemical formula (the molecular formula of cadaverine). There is no need to look for intruders in this list. Indeed, by exploiting effects of arbitrariness and suggesting its absence of motivation, the passage illustrates the logic of disjunctive lists, perhaps inviting the reader to take part in a game of building blocks and rearrange words into meaningful sequences, as Ellison has to rebuild and “rescue himself” (p. 258). Owing to its intransitivity, the passage also seems to open the way towards poetry. According to Bernard Sève in *De haut en bas. Philosophie des listes*, a list may be poetic insofar as it frees the words from their referential or even sometimes semantic connections (p. 120). As Anne-Laure Tissut wrote in one of her essays in 2006, “such [apparent] nonsense incites the reader to enjoy the sounds of this original language in which the unexpected prevails” (p. 50, my translation).

When dwelling on his art and comparing writing with woodworking, Ellison emphasizes the simplicity of wood, yet concludes in deceptively simple terms: “Dammit, a table was a table, was a table” (p. 139). Wood may be much more real than

words, but words come back and haunt us, like Gertrude Stein's famous sentence<sup>2</sup>, relying on repetition, which has often been quoted and parodied.

When all is said—or erased—, what remains is the insistant exploration of language. Several reflexive sections convey this fascination, dealing as they are with metaphor, word play, or meaning in/and language:

It's incredible that a sentence is ever understood [...] Even if grammatical recognitions are crude, meaning is present. Even if the words are utterly confusing, there is meaning. Even if the semantic relationships are only general or categorical. Even if the language is unknown. [...] Language never really effaces its own presence, but creates the illusion that it does in cases where meaning presumes a first priority. (p. 44)

Furthermore, the various allusions to the philosophy of language in *Erasure*, including the references to Wittgenstein, Tarski and Carnap, point to Everett's investigating the interrelation of literature and philosophy. Thus, when Ellison chooses "a mere delineation of specific case descriptions from which [he], at least, could make inferences" (p. 26), the reference to Tarski and Carnap, though unobtrusive, is not fortuitous: after all Tarski's long paper entitled "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages" was a landmark event in analytic philosophy; as to Carnap, an advocate of logical positivism, he asked what we can legitimately talk about. This question is also one that the reader of Everett's novel may ask. Wittgenstein held that most philosophical problems were semantic as they were misunderstandings caused by imprecise language. It is an influence that Everett has acknowledged in several interviews: "I was seduced completely by Wittgenstein," [...] "He still informs my way of thinking. The root for me is matters of language." (Newton n.p.) Adequately, the list quoted above is a list of *words* and *phrases*, not a list of extra-linguistic items. After all, it is language that we must remember, in its minutest details.

If *Erasure* makes strong demands on its reader, who finds himself/herself displaced and remobilized, it is perhaps because, like Ellison's writing, it defies form, but "in defying it [seeks] to affirm it" (p. 139). It is not enough to share the vision, one must also possess enough courage to accept constant revision.

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<sup>2</sup> See "a rose is a rose is a rose" from Stein's *Operas and Plays*. Interestingly it is already a variation on the original line "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" from the 1913 poem *Sacred Emily*. "A rose is a rose is a rose" is often understood to mean "things are what they are", asserting the law of identity.



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