

Nonnarrative and History in Barrett Watten's *Under Erasure*

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This essay analyzes how Barrett Watten's long poem, *Under Erasure* (1991), concentrates on erasure and displacement through the nonnarrative forms of the poem, in which diverse narrations of historical events are present to claim for their discontinuity and the author's self-consciousness. In formulating those nonnarrative forms in relation to a time structure of continual leaps and absences in his *The Constructivist Moment* (2003), Watten's vision of both poetry and history requires agency and the transformation of ideology. For him, nonnarrative poetry and history are strikingly similar in their preference for developing episodic remembering beyond periodization or conventional narrative frame. His approach calls for reflection on the connections of both identity and information as global processes of continual re-interpretation and erasure. More synchronic than diachronic, *Under Erasure* employs a repeated stanzaic structure throughout the whole poem. All this reveals Watten's essential paradox: regardless of rigid formal structure, writing is continually generating diverse meanings. By means of these conceptual and formal principles, Watten has investigated how to gain access to a new representation through nonrepresentation, simply by radically re-historicizing what was once culturally reduced.

Keywords: Barrett Watten; *Under Erasure*; nonnarrative; history; Language Poetry movement

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Nonnarrativa e historia en *Under Erasure*, de Barrett Watten

Este ensayo analiza cómo el poema de Barrett Watten, *Under Erasure* (1991), se basa en el uso de la borradura y el desplazamiento en las formas nonnarrativas en un texto donde la narración de eventos históricos demanda discontinuidad y autoconsciencia. Al relacionar esta poesía en su libro *The Constructivist Moment* (2003) con una estructura temporal llena de continuos saltos y ausencias, la visión que Watten tiene de la poesía y la historia requiere acción y transformación ideológica. Para él, la poesía nonnarrativa y la historia se asemejan mucho,

en tanto que ambas prefieren el recuerdo episódico a la periodización o al marco narrativo convencional. Estas estrategias propician la reflexión sobre la conexión entre identidad e información como un proceso global de reinterpretación y borradura continuas. Este tipo de escritura es más sincrónica que diacrónica, como se manifiesta en el recurso a una estructura estrófica repetitiva en *Under Erasure*. La paradoja esencial que se produce en este poema de Watten es que, a pesar de esta rígida estructura, su escritura genera continuamente diferentes significados. El poeta ha investigado en este texto la manera de acceder a una nueva representación a través de la no representación y de forma sencilla: articulando una nueva perspectiva sobre la historia alejada de encorsetamientos culturales convencionales.

Palabras clave: Barrett Watten; *Under Erasure*; nonarrativa; historia; movimiento Poetas del Lenguaje

This essay aims to analyze Barrett Watten's long poem *Under Erasure* (1991) as exemplary of his innovative poetics. It is useful to start with a significant message he has tweeted: "I'm interested in ideas of writing that are so complex and critical that [they] cause a rethinking of what counts as real and true" (2012, n.p.). This description achieves a depth of potentiality and reality where both life experience and writing are involved in continual transformation in *Under Erasure*: "Each word becoming the autofocus of its claims / (The endless poem a cascade of possible endings)" (1991b, 17), determining operative reflection on any series of historical or private events.

Readers of Watten are probably familiar with his involvement in the Language Poetry tendency and Watten's transgressive work links with that of other members of this group, especially Lyn Hejinian and Ron Silliman. His books *Complete Thought* (1982), *Progress* (1985) and *Bad History* (1998) look more closely at the conceptual and formal concerns expressed in *Under Erasure*. All his works show fixed organizational patterns and explore the vulnerable coherence of language in society. For instance, *Complete Thought* is structured in four parts, the first three of which are subdivided with Roman numerals contrasting serial fixed thoughts and social habits with objects in chaotic contemporary culture. Paradoxically however, that structure rigidity suggesting coherence confronts the reader's cultural passivity: "the presence of artifacts, of remnants of a decomposed or disintegrating culture suggests the impermanence of such systems of thought, the eventual crumbling of every edifice" (Conte 1995, 209). Additionally, a formal analysis of *Progress* (1985) reveals closer similarities with *Under Erasure*: (a) there are stanzas ending in dots in both poems, (b) most lines are discursive statements responding to his own story, and (c) events require a voice for haunting perceptions of loss. It is not surprising then, that for Ron Day both *Progress* and *Under Erasure* exemplify Watten's poetics, adding a political dimension, "which questions the power of historical repetition and the reification of systemic economies of language" (1995, 50). Similarly, Watten's *Bad History* (1998) follows a strict organization of six sections, alphabetically arranged from A to F, each with a pattern of 6-4-4-4-6-0 subsections. Written in prose, its historical and political context is the 1990-1991 Gulf War, but Watten's notable practice is to advocate that the war "becomes a floating signifier" and the reader should "take part in the construction of meaning" (Metres 2000, 178-179).

Another Language poet, Lyn Hejinian, has similarly worked with fixed textual organization in *My Life* (1980), where "deferral of meaning and denial of plenitude are central to [her] conception of writing" (Perloff 1990, 54). The first edition of this book included thirty-seven sections, each with thirty-seven sentences, matching her thirty-seven years of life at that time. Eight years later, she correspondingly added eight sections with eight sentences each for the second edition. Likewise, her *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (1978) is based on forty-two sections with lines of varying length, each spatially indented according to the place of its first letter of the alphabet. Here, Hejinian thematizes the multiple exposure of meaning at the expense of reading:

“Transitive, intransitive, equative: these are all ways of dealing with the world” (Quartermain 1992, 22). Ron Silliman has also become a paradigmatic practitioner of a systematic organization with open correspondence. This poet’s deft use of the Fibonacci sequence in *Tjanting* (1981), in which every paragraph after the first two is the sum of the lines in the two preceding ones, plays with a continuous succession of non-correlative sentences, statements and interrogations, which ultimately turn into his discursive social experience. More complex is Silliman’s elaboration of the twenty-six sections of his long poem, since each section first appeared in a single book between 1979 and 2004—all finally published in a single volume, *The Alphabet* (2008)—in which the initial letters of each title make up the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. Jerome McGann has pointed out Silliman’s political approach in *The Alphabet*: “The effort is to build a structure of words where the endless transformational potential of the language (and the world) may be displayed” (2007, 55). The crucial significance of Watten, Hejinian and Silliman’s avant-garde position was underscored by sharing these basic formal presumptions, which were inevitably linked to Watten’s recurrent fascination for “[a] language that was primarily not about itself, but about [...] [t]he unutterable inexpressiveness of that *not*” (Watten 2008, 78; emphasis in the original).

Watten’s consideration of nonnarrative—mostly developed in *The Constructivist Moment* (2003)—takes as its starting point the idea that “time in modernist and postmodernist art and writing is often organized in ways that are not dependent on narrative as formal guarantee of meaning or as necessary horizon of understanding” (2003, 198). His exploration of the question of the nonnarrative also strengthens a connection with other varied authors ranging from Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) and William Blake (1757-1827) to Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). His thesis is also extended to the New York School poets, and the experiments found in John Cage’s and Jackson Mac Low’s work. However, his fresh perspective on this issue is presented in light of some historical conditions that he considers essential in reframing American culture:

About 1975, new conditions for the social reproduction of nonnarrative forms emerged—during a period of national crisis at about the time of the Fall of Saigon—in the Language School and elsewhere. This phenomenon has been related to the crisis of historical narrative in postmodernism, but it was also based on the inherent possibilities of various genres. A rejection of narrative for other forms of temporal organization took place, and was culturally productive, at a given historical moment. (Watten 2003, 198)

The most radical experimentalism with this technique has been carried out by the Language Poets, for whom language use is the search for an attempted atemporality practicing temporal break, juxtaposition, multiple perceptions and attracting attention to the social and political levels of language. Coherent with this vision and obsession with time is Watten’s belief that this literary group has

asynchronous origins. This is best exemplified in their collective work, *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography* (2006): “The work’s scenes of re-enactment are *never* simply sharp divisions between past and present, while its serial form of narration will *always* include aspects of discontinuity rather than present a continuous time” (Watten 2013, 108; emphasis in the original). The effort to put aside the useful chronological order in this collective work with no beginning or end constantly reorients the reader’s perception about how meaning is made. In this sense, Watten arrives at two main lines of thought concerning time: Firstly, “[a]t isolated moments, a fragment of poetry, a caught remark, or an anecdote become memorial sites at an intersection of language, desire, memory, or futurity that will be essential to the author’s understanding of the literary” (109), and secondly, the issue of reading reality based on “a nonnarrative amnesia in which the displacement of events becomes interpretable as a universal tragedy identified with the state—eliding the fact of loss, as well as many contingent facts” (218).

Indeed, the notion of avant-garde in the Language Poets has been a varied forceful articulation deriving from the social critique, non-referentiality and foregrounding of language. Over time, critics have highlighted their poetry as being based on “a high degree of syntactic and verbal fracturing,” which is “irregularly accompanied by much less fractured theories” (Perelman 1996, 64). For instance, Jacob Edmond offers a wide analysis of their discursive poetics, which “drew on many sources to emphasize the importance of language in the construction of social reality” (2005, 183), and was related to Russian futurism, formalism, Viktor Shklovsky, Marxism, Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, Objectivism, the Frankfurt School and certain French post-structuralists. These influences have variously affected the diverse members of this group. Insofar as Language Poets connect a new model of poetry to a flood of theoretical approaches with multiple practices, Linda Reinfeld confirms striking “close readings and careful juxtapositions: Bernstein/Derrida, Howe/Adorno, Palmer/Barthes” (1992, 5).

Marjorie Perloff and Jerome McGann were among the early academic critics to delve into the motives for the Language Poets’ hybridized discourse.¹ Perloff insists that for this poetic group, “Theory is never more than the extension of practice” (1985, 218), reflecting on how poetry and poetics coexist in their work without

¹ Hundreds of essays, interviews and reviews in scholarly journals and books legitimize the significance of Language Poetry in the contemporary literary scene. For instance, among academic monographs, I would highlight books such as David Arnold’s *Poetry & Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* (2007), George Hartley’s *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (1989), Hank Lazer’s *Opposing Poetics. Part Two: Readings* (1996), Bob Perelman’s *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (1996), Linda Reinfeld’s *Language Poetry: Poetry as Rescue* (1992) and Ann Vickery, *Leaving the Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (2000). Additionally, most Language Poets have become university teachers as exemplified by Bruce Andrews (Fordham University), Rae Armantrout (University of California, San Diego), Charles Bernstein (University of Pennsylvania), Carla Harryman (Eastern Michigan University), Lyn Hejinian (University of California, Berkeley), Susan Howe (State University of New York, Buffalo), Steve McCaffery (State University of New York, Buffalo), Bob Perelman (University of Pennsylvania) and Barrett Watten (Wayne State University).

boundaries. McGann defends this kind of poetry as antinarrative and nonnarrative, which “exemplifies a significant strand of postmodernist writing” while it “deploys a consciously antithetical political content” (1987, 634).

To this effect, avant-garde practices like Watten’s nonnarrative, Ron Silliman’s new sentence and Lyn Hejinian’s rejection of closure interrogate poetry itself and particularly coincide in attempting a renewal of language conventions. Significantly, Watten and Hejinian were joint editors of *Poetics Journal*, which published a special issue on “Non/Narrative” in 1985. Watten’s work has persisted with its focus on nonnarrative over time: “a foregrounding of language opposed to reference; an emphasis on the material text as iterative or noncommunicating; an avoidance of the speaking subject, persona, or identity claims; and experiments in nonnarrative” (Watten 2016, 139). Kaplan Page Harris points out that this was a political answer to subject-based poetry, claiming that “one of the main arguments concerns the abuse of language under market ideology” and facilitating “a synchronic strategy of ‘non-narrative’” (2009, 808). Likewise, Hejinian’s formal model of non-closure acknowledges incompleteness and favors discursive activity: “the material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself” (Hejinian 2000, 42). Hejinian’s position repeats Watten’s stance of nonnarrativity and accomplishes what Srinkath Reddy terms “a postmodern narratology of digression” (2009, 58). Traces of this complexity can also be observed in Silliman’s strategy of nonnarrative in *The New Sentence*, in which the paragraph “is a unity of quantity, nor logic or argument” and “[s]entence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity” (Silliman 1987, 91). In the end, Silliman replaces the historical determinism of traditional narration by a more fruitful practice in the social formation of the subject: “the new sentence,’ a term that is both descriptive of a writing procedure and, at times, a sign of literary-politics proselytizing” (Perelman 1996, 61). In recent times, literary groups like the New Brutalists, the School of Continuation, Flarf and Occupy Poetry have emerged to respond to these Language Poets’ avant-garde proposals. However, none of these groups have proliferated with the fecundity of the Language Poets’ experimental work as a terrain with poetic and social implications, and have been unable to articulate innovative formal techniques in order to observe “the processes of defamiliarization, foregrounding, and serial construction that make history happen as real-time events and eras unfold,” as the Language Poets have developed (Watten 2003, 235).

Watten’s recurrent use of the term “history” (nine times) in *Under Erasure* is clearly bound to a kind of critique or discursive practice aiming to provocatively confront his readers about certain social and cultural issues in modern society: “opening the work as a site for wider frames for poetic agency and social meaning” (2016, 223). *Under Erasure* does not focus on the recuperation of the past as a conflicting issue in retrieving historical or personal events. Rather, this long poem concentrates on erasure and displacement through its nonnarrative forms, in which diverse temporal narrations are present to claim for the discontinuity of history and the author’s self-consciousness, as Watten also observes in Lyn Hejinian’s poem “Exit”:

Clearly, the poem's engagement of a range of narrative frames creates a potential field of referents for its explicitly stated theme of self-consciousness, even if the poem's gaps and discontinuities, as well as its moments of linguistic opacity, themselves significantly produce these effects [...] While there is no denying narrative in the poem, or the possibility of framing a narrative reading, nonnarrative organizes the poem's materials within a range of possible effects that exceed narrative—an effect of lyric atemporality, even as the poem grants that different narrative frames may be brought to the poem at different moments in time. (Watten 2003, 203)

Here, Watten is reflecting on Lyn Hejinian's 1982 poem "Exit" but there is much that can be learned from this poem to apply to *Under Erasure*. His nonnarrative technique denies the conventional description of a course of events. Instead, discontinuities, paradoxes, non-closure, the discursive practice of history reconstruction, the various contexts themselves, in fact, everything, lead to a configuration of time that is "mobilized to engage narrative readings, beginning at its point of production" (204). It is especially in this kind of poetry where Watten's alternatives to narrative texts perfectly work, having many consequences for his intellectual approach to life experience.

The agreement at the heart of Watten's thesis is that Language writing is not shaped by tradition or any master narrative, but rather constitutes a radical break with them. In this sense, he is concerned with the role of synchronicity as the characteristic mark in Language writing. By bringing atemporality, juxtaposition discontinuity and nonlinearity back to the text, this author rejects, as his colleagues do, any master narrative, and defends the practice of textual nonnarrative as exploratory and definitely interlinking the present and the past: "The form of the *Grand Piano* is anchored by multiple time frames: what it means to write in the present, to reflect on what was written in the past, and to have written *in the present* at some time in the past" (Watten 2013, 107; emphasis in the original). The Language Poets, and especially Watten, by relentlessly examining time and the expressiveness of language, inevitably challenge our mode of perception and intelligibility in fully understanding any sequence of events, that is, history.

In discussing Watten's conception of a nonnarrative text determined by the distinction "between events (fabula) and narrative (syuzhet)—between an underlying substrate of presentation and an always incomplete form of representation" (2003, 206)—the author highlights his desire to subvert the pretended transparency of traditional history narrative: "Such a distinction dissociates the transparency of narration to event, severing its overarching transcendental organization from the progression of subordinated events toward discursive closure. Nonannarrative calls into question the assumed transparency of history to event" (206).

While we all know that the distinctive nature of Watten's work is formed from a varied conceptual platform, ranging from Gertrude Stein and the Frankfurt School social theory up to Charles Olson, his poetics of nonnarrative relies on a postmodernist

view which raises the issue of transparency connected with history. Different formal representations of history will entail different understanding of historical events. For example, annals—“events with dates organized on a time line” (Watten 2003, 211)—chronicles—based on “a necessity of sequence such as ‘and then, and then’ but come to no retrospective conclusion” (211)—and historical narrative—with the intention of organizing “events in a unified frame” (211)—call attention to the temporal sequence of events. Conversely, Watten opposes the historical narrative associated with passive readers who take it for granted. He exemplifies his position with Seyed Alavi’s installation at Terrain Gallery, San Francisco, *Blueprints of the Times* (1990), where the artist removed the dates from old newspapers, drastically negating the objective representation of narrative history and demanding new meanings of the past and present from the viewer: “The entire form of Alavi’s installation is thus a nonnarrative that by means of a specific form of displacement and reintegration constructs, in both senses of the word, history” (Watten 2003, 213).

Watten’s focus on the formal presentation of history is fundamental. For instance, when he quotes Fredric Jameson’s statement that Universal History “is fundamentally nonnarrative and nonrepresentational” (Jameson 1981, 83; quoted in Watten 2003, 214), and its function is to highlight the significance of forms in approaching historical events, Watten reaffirms nonnarrativity as suitable to go further the limits of the traditional narrative of both culture and history: “A critical account of nonnarrativity, as well as aesthetic strategies for its use, thus may proceed not simply in terms of the negation of cultural narratives (as with Jameson’s postmodernism) but in a discussion of the historical agency of its forms” (214).

Indeed, to observe how the TV news wraps “short narrative units that can be assembled at any future date into larger narratives” (211)—exemplified by specific events such as the Iran hostage crisis or the Persian Gulf War—questions the methodological ambition of narrating an index of events under the form of realism. This sharpened attention to media forms serves to supplement Watten’s defense of discontinuity attached to history:

[I]t is as much the commercials interrupting war footage segued between sound bites that provide the formal totality of mass communication with overdetermining effects—so that discontinuity just is the formal guarantee of narration. The construction of history takes place through just such a paradox of interrupting, overdetermined, and underanalyzed narratives. That such an assembly line of narrated events can never be identical to Universal History is inscribed in the very relation of narrative to event, an insight captured by the device of the anecdote. (211)

For Watten, the conversion required to accept that both transparency and opaqueness are simultaneously present in any historical account provides wider access to the repossession of linguistic forms and the retrieval of memories. Psychologists like

Michael C. Anderson have analyzed how some cues are crucial to activate unsuspected memories: “[R]etrieval is a progression from one or more cues to a target memory, via associative connections linking them together, through a process of spreading activation” (2009, 166). In Watten’s case, the Vietnam War was a significant event in his life, a theme which is recurrent in some of his poems, like “Place Names” in *Opera—Works* (1975) and *Under Erasure* (1991b). The cue is the Fall of Saigon, representing loss and conveying a new moral vision for Americans, which provides a new view on displaced and discontinuous memories as seen in the following lines from “Place Names”:

Old wooden letters. Propeller blades.

ALLIED DIVISIONS

50

NATIONAL ICE

COLD CALIFORNIA, INC.

TO LEASE HEAVY

What I have always thought & said. (Watten 1975, 49-50)

This fragmentary presentation of his horrific experience of the war confirms the refusal of assertiveness, as narrative history demands. In this work the varied forms and overlapped references favor memories that were part of his world, rather than those to fix his position within it: “The poem continues its reading of cultural detritus until the signs themselves, liberated in a space of negation, produce a kind of temporal free fall that is its own memorial of self-consciousness” (Watten 2003, 228). His nonnarration does not describe precisely what occurred. It is rather an invitation to read signs that generate differences and resemblances of diverse meanings.

Psychologist Alan Baddeley defends the notion that “sharing autobiographical memories can be a pleasant and socially supportive activity [...] Finally, autobiographical recollection can be used to help us cope with adversity” (2009a, 138). In the Language Poets’ commitment to nonnarration and autobiographical memories, we should recall that their collective work, *The Grand Piano*, is often concerned with intersubjectivity and the sharing of a collective aesthetics negotiated by each author. This strong sense of collaboration among these poets was extended to other publications such as *Legend* (1980) and *Leningrad* (1991), as well as their participation at the SUNY Buffalo Poetics Listserve. However, this instrumental drive for multiauthorship cannot be considered simply a therapy for supporting each other or overcoming nostalgia. Once again, Watten makes reference to the recursive theoretical climate they are involved in: “At the intersection of writing and friendship, collectivity is imagined as a ground for meaning” (2013, 114). Ultimately, these poets’ autobiographical memories are dynamically constructed by the readers’ perceptions, since the open-endedness of their accounts “will be as much a matter of dissensus as of consensus” (120), and the deferral of closure is opposed to the conventional narration of history.

Watten has analyzed the tensions between narrative and nonnarrative involved in the construction of the present. He considers “presentism” as:

[A]n interpretive practice in which object and interpreter are not historically framed, even if temporal indices of present time are invoked (or not); *periodization* provides historical framing for an interpretive practice. Presentism thus connects to nonnarrative representation, in the sense that both rely on the suspension or refusal of narrative, while periodization requires narrative frames. I propose to include the often-hard usage of *presentism* as “the interpretation of past events in terms of present concerns” within the more general sense of interpretation that does not distinguish between past and present. (2011, 125; emphasis in the original)

The groundbreaking writing of some Language Poets serves, in Watten’s view, as an opportunity to debate the relationship between the present and history. For example, some of these poets published the ten volumes of the above-mentioned *The Grand Piano*. This collective work is autobiographical, its authors write in the present interpreting the past with nonnarrative techniques of assembling various literary genres, open seriality, no identity request or indeterminate historical frames. Following these experimental techniques, their real challenge is to highlight that daily life in the present is associated with the past. Psychologist Michael C. Anderson specifically refers to the phenomenon that daily stimuli serve to automatically connect with the past as retrieval mode: “[W]e aren’t bombarded by memories every waking second. [...] [W]e have to be in the right frame of mind or retrieval mode to recollect our past” (2009, 171). Significantly, most of the retrieval cues in Watten’s “right frame of mind” seem to involve a conscious inclination to search for a nonnarrative that facilitates the open interpretation of past events from the present, and his refusal “to separate beginning, middle and end, leaving suspended any conclusion” (Watten 2013, 123).

One of the illustrative examples that Watten mentions is his piece published in volume four of *The Grand Piano* published in 2007. There is no temporal frame in his text, just a mention of some Saturday in late September, and the poet remembers some of Robert Creeley’s lines—published in 1972 and related to the Vietnam War—simultaneously perceiving a physical space that the Berlin Wall once occupied before 1989. This text ends with a fragmentary map that may correspond to the Potrero Hill Playground in San Francisco, including two lines on the left side: “Others Replace / Fact no value” (Watten 2007, 67). The vagueness of geography and time also corresponds to his perception of the present: “Writing in the absolute present (which fades away as I write)” (67). The productive dispersal of time and space described in this work permits open interpretation and deepens our view into the continual dynamism of reality. Furthermore, when we ponder this tactical proposition derived from nonnarrative techniques, it is not only about experimentalism but it also draws us inevitably into some kind of political intentionality: “Given the multiple overlap of these techniques and their motivation toward a common horizon of unmasking the

automatized and quotidian for its underlying structures, a new order of theory and practice (and pedagogy) emerges. While claims of conceptual writing to reinvent the wheel are bunk, I welcome the expanded community of practice within a common horizon of nothing less than social transformation” (Watten 2011, 152-153).

In formulating nonnarrative in relation to a time structure of continual leaps and absences, Watten’s vision of history requires agency and transformation of ideology. Hélène Aji finds that this kind of poetry becomes more significant, since it reveals that “writing history could not be negated only through the questioning of accountability to events, but by the very possibility of an absence of events” (2007, 20). Indeed, the issue of transparency regarding history becomes manifestly inadequate. Furthermore, Watten adopts Derrida’s *sous rature* [“under erasure”] of writing as an open linguistic structure with the presence and absence of words, undercutting narrator and narration and following Derrida’s recognition that “[t]he concepts of present, past, and future, everything in the concepts of time and history which implies evidence of them—the metaphysical concept of time in general—cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace” (Derrida [1967] 1997, 67).

For Watten, nonnarrative poetry and history are strikingly similar in their preference for developing episodic remembering beyond periodization or narrative frame. His intention is to illustrate the vulnerability of the continual process of remembering and forgetting, discontinuity and replacement as in *Under Erasure* (1991b):

On which all things arrive, / fixed / In a process we remember to forget... (3)

While the city could be forgotten / In memory of itself / filling the page... (10)

Once he has been pushed over the edge of amnesia / They remember a number of such moments very well (15)

It produces amnesia only by reinforcing a trace (23)

As if Lyndon Johnson were an amnesia or urban space / Not that we will ever be more aware of his language / They retain each memory only by forgetting a pain... (37)

Contagious irritation, / to memorize / Light under amnesia in open fields (41)

The floating body may have been forgotten by memory (48)

The excessive number of oxymorons in these lines graphically explains what the juxtaposition of presence and absence means. There is no connecting line between narrative or dated events that can encourage the reader to imagine the depicted or real-life situation. Instead, the representation of this information-processing demonstrates that events are also under erasure, present and absent and clearly attached to what psychologists Daniel L. Schacter and Endel Tulving define as episodic memory, which grows out of semantic knowledge and becomes fundamental in “the person’s awareness of his or her self” (1982, 28). Following this perspective, the question is whether this writing practice based on paradox offers a revision of the reader’s historical condition or whether it leads to confusion and weakens political/social commitment. Another

psychologist, Alan Baddeley, responds to this feedback between memory and amnesia highlighting the efficiency and flexibility of these “in storing the information we need and discarding what is less important” (2009b, 16). However, Watten stresses memory-amnesia or presence-absence as an essential relation between having these faculties and deliberately exercising them, since both are the foundation of action. Consequently, in the larger framework of real life, his suggestions that this nonnarrative reading rearticulates the coordinates of the individual and his/her socio-political order highlight the value of critical practice.

It is precisely in regard to this aspect that Watten’s commitment to the political emerges. His idea of history in *Under Erasure* is different from the approach of traditional historians. First, he presents the convergence of varied life information in the present:

*In the hysteria each present is
Of our future,
inscribing its past...* (Watten 1991b, 6)

Secondly, some events reflect a retrieval of his personal episodes that provide some context through temporal, “*If only I were born in 1948*” (9), or spatial clues, “*Crowds on Sundays at Ocean Beach...*” (9). Within this same category of private experience, some lines disclose the commuting metaphor. This is the doing and undoing of experience:

*I look into myself,
only to see
Crowds in two directions pass by...* (4)

And the repetitive concept of erasure associated with his implicit memory, such as in “I remember a pain that must be continually erased...” (17) or “I forget in the ongoing path of self-destruction” (49). Psychologist Michael C. Anderson summarizes this in revelatory terms: “Implicit memory phenomena such as repetition priming provide evidence for the unconscious influence of experience on behaviour” (2009, 188). Schematically, this second level of personal remembering brings into play the recognition of a stimulus “by recollecting the occurrence of encountering it before, a process thought to be more attention demanding, slower, and qualitatively distinct from the assessment of familiarity” (189). Hence the use of personal memories here points to a body of thought as supplementary to the need to mark out the boundaries between automatic interpretation and reflective responses to life circumstances.

Watten’s blurb for the CD *Live at the Ear* (1993), recorded two years after the publication of the first printed edition of *Under Erasure*, clearly mentions that this book “was written ‘through’ the hiatus of 1989 and argues out the epochal implications of that end [*sic*]. As with the revised version of Stein’s *Making of Americans*, there are implications for social communication in a poetics of ellipses, considering what has

been elided (and all the possibility that went with it), but making use of the ciphers that remain” (Watten 1993, n.p.). Baddeley affirms: “Autobiographical memory is difficult to study because we often have no record from the time that the memories are initially encoded, and hence cannot check their accuracy” (2009a, 161). Watten wrote some diaries related to his experience in 1989, and his use of the term “hiatus” reflects failed memories despite their leaving a strong impression in his life. However, the “chain of events, / as on screen” (1991b, 3) in that year is not concerned with some false memory syndrome, but is in fact clearly documented. Among many others, these social and political situations potentially contributed towards the construction of his self: George Bush senior’s election as President, the legalization of Solidarity in Poland, the Soviet Union abandoning Afghanistan, the *Satanic Verses* controversy, the Iron Curtain starting to fall, same-sex relationships gaining legal recognition in Denmark, Chile returning to democratic elections after Pinochet governing since 1973, and the early operations of Al-Qaeda beginning in New York. 1989 is a date that appears in *Under Erasure* calling for reflection on the connections of both identity and information as a global process of continual re-interpretation and erasure:

Mark his identity as an exchange

At the hub of information.

“1989” (Watten 1991b, 31)

Another consistent use of history comes through various dated events, significantly, most of which are related to World War II. All provide specific aspects of a heightening sense of historical context, seeking either to illustrate the bitterness of war or potentially playing off the tension between that absent period and the present in *Under Erasure* (Watten 1991b):

A defeat at the hands of memory / Since 1940, / or the Fall of Saigon (51)

Winning absolute victory over the Germans in 1943 (4)

Its long periods of boredom punctuated by terror / Of anything else that happened on V-E Day, 1945 (20)

Leningrad in 1942 (36)

Retreat of the Germans in 1944 precipitating rain... (47)

The inclusion of these lines in a mass of varied observations involved in a strong cultural textuality is not arbitrary. In this poem we cannot find the specific term war. However, all those discontinuous references clearly operate for that term: the defeat of France in 1940 soon after the beginning of World War II, the Fall of Saigon in 1975, the Soviet victory at the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943, the end of World War II in 1945, the artillery bombardment and siege of Leningrad during 1942, and the retreat of the German troops at the Western Front of Leningrad in 1944 cannot be

forgotten. They are easily recognized and recalled, especially because they conform to the category of high-priority events, which are usually “recalled almost perfectly” (Schacter and Tulving 1982, 18). However, the allusion to these events in the poem conveys an ideological construct internal to Watten as poet, revealing the effect of horrific situations in his long-term memory mediated by these turning-point events, whether celebrated or lamented.

This is the assumption that Watten’s colleague in the Language Poets group, Kit Robinson, points to when appealing to the concept of erasure in American individuals since “the stories we have been told are inadequate to account for the predicament in which we find ourselves” (1995, 63). Watten defends this search for a language that should be understood historically in his introduction to the joint edition of *Progress/Under Erasure* published in 2004: “[Language] must take into account the vast forgetting of context and experience that has taken place” (13). In *Under Erasure* other exemplary lines follow his concern with other events that correspond to the political presence of the French Revolution, workers leaving the Ford Motor Co. in Rouge River as seen in Walker Evans’s famous photograph, or the efficacy of remembering the first signs of an ozone hole in Antarctica:

On this day of the revolutionary calendar in 1789 (Watten 1991b, 26)

In a democratic art, / to represent / Rouge River in photographs, 1947... (26)

A widening hole over Antarctica untheorized in 1949 (40)

A reader would decode the dimensions of these facts and coherently describe them and their impact across cultures. This approach has been illustrated by Watten’s insistence on the problematics of indeterminacy, which “carries with it the seeds of its own forgetting” (2004, 12-13). Furthermore, Watten defends that “the breath we speak, as linguistic structures, are media of the forgotten. The poem addresses such mechanisms of forgetting, and measures the chances of recovery” (13). Consequently, *Under Erasure* offers readers appropriate cues, since these are potentially enlightening in recalling and interpreting diverse historical contexts.

Watten also becomes fascinated with the relational vision of remembering historical events and exercising his current mode of thought. Selecting memories from his long term-memory and combining the recollection of public events and his fully rational present by means of episodic and semantic memory form part of his integrative vision of an aesthetic communication. Psychologist Michael W. Eysenck enriches this approach pointing out that “semantic and episodic memory are separate” (2009, 115). Following the proposals by M.A. Wheeler, D.T. Stuss and E. Tulving, Eysenck states that “the right prefrontal cortex was more active during episodic memory retrieval than during semantic memory retrieval” (2009, 115), exemplifying the “similarities between the two memory types. Suppose you remember meeting your friend yesterday afternoon at Starbuck’s. That clearly involves episodic memory, because you are remembering an

event at a given time in a given place. However, semantic memory is also involved—some of what you remember involves your general knowledge about coffee shops, what coffee tastes like, and so on” (114). This case perfectly fits to Watten’s view in his essay, “The Conduit of Communication in Everyday Life,” illustrating his use of both memory types in *Under Erasure* which aspires to connect both old events and his general context of intellectual intentions to become “a kind of internalizing of the conduits of communication” (Watten 1995, 38), serving “as a test pattern that would open up for poetry the possibilities of recurrence and feedback organizing the metalingual underpinnings of everyday life” (38) and with this recognition: “Cultural landscape and linguistic artifacts thus work to efface acquired metaphors that would be the vehicle for the normative presentation of myself and my concerns” (38).

To someone for whom poetry constitutes the center of history and man, the condition of language must be a definitive issue. Recalling the reader’s ceaseless reappropriation of words conveys the thinking that forms the logical foundation of his ontology. The two systematic aspects which Rod Smith finds in Watten’s literary research—acceptance of indeterminacy and understanding of ideology as contingent (1995, x)—replace conventional narrative and the common relations governing literature, politics and culture. Indeed, one can readily perceive that being under erasure turns modern poetry into an exercise of choice with no exact measure for all the possibilities of long-term memory and revival of selected amnesia:

*A temporary amnesia,
its report filed
As if you had never been a witness...* (Watten 1991b, 39)

Indeed, Watten encourages readers to resist impassiveness. For him, writing implies holding an ideological position, as inevitably occurs within literary activity. Indeed, the images that he includes in *Under Erasure* appear to confront his readers with political and historical issues: “Perhaps more relevant visual images would be: monuments; victories and defeats; republicanism; institutional (fallen) language; cybernetic social circularity. The work accounts for both ‘subject’ and ‘system’ mutually reinforcing and simultaneously tearing each apart” (Watten 1991a, n.p.).

Watten’s ideas on the relation between historical issues and the new role of writing resonate throughout this quotation. In adding nonnarrative to historiography, this author has generated a social and culturally productive effort. For him, nonnarratives do not deny narrative, they are simply another discursive form: “Nonnarratives are forms of discursive presentation where both linear and contextual syntax exist but where univocal motivation, retrospective closure, and transcendental perspective are suspended, deferred or do not exist” (2003, 200). Indeed, Watten follows narratologist Seymour Chatman: “Non-narrative text-types do not have an internal time sequence, even though, obviously, they take time to read, view, or hear. The

underlying structures are static or temporal—synchronic not diachronic” (1990, 9).² More synchronic than diachronic, Watten’s poetry relies on “a contextual, political and ethical form of discourse which cannot do without a serious examination of its methods and its aims” (Aji 2007, 17). More clearly, he is interested in the game of what is absent or present in the process of making cultural products, rather than favoring any perspective over the other.

What is also striking about *Under Erasure* is that Watten celebrates ideological interpellation, while writing within a static formal structure that is repeated throughout the poem: “In *Under Erasure*, I tried to write social subjectivity in the form of the poetic object, triangulated in a mechanical hybrid of reflection, signification, and structure” (Watten 2016, 222). Formally, every page follows the same strict pattern of five stanzas, each with three lines in a continual enjambment. Three of these five stanzas are typed in italics, visually facilitating their circulation of an internal monologue within the same text. Briefly, the stanzas with regular font are more affirmative, philosophical and rationally condensed, while those in italics are proactively poetic and unstable. This reassertion of control and visible sequencing does not preclude the reader’s agency, which is continually involved in conversation with implicit assumptions summarized in the title itself, *Under Erasure*. Ironically, the stories he narrates are decontextualized affirmations or suggestions rather than a linear development of thoughts integrated in a patterned textual composition, where meaning is liable to be erased and reconstructed.

Highlighting poetry as appropriation by the reader, the use of frequent rhymes in this long poem is worth noting. Robinson has found over fifteen rhymes in the italicized stanzas in the first half of *Under Erasure*. The intensive use of this device would be consistent with the use of repetition in a poem intended for memorizing, as was traditionally often the case. Hence the utility of repetition visible through a patterned structure in the construction of the poem, allusions to history from the present and rhymes repeated over and over again with the incantatory effect that Robinson points out: “The resonances are the most affecting for the textual resistance the rhymes must arch across” (1995, 62).

All this reveals Watten’s essential paradox: regardless of fixed and rigid formal structure, writing is continually generating excesses. In the end, we can certainly categorize his many stories and thoughts about his vital experience, names and daily life. However, Barrett Watten’s identity is impossible to explain, since we only have phrases, paragraphs, lines, stanzas and language through reiterated soliloquies based on his crucial notion of being under erasure: “A repetition by means of which each sense is undone” (Watten 1991b, 51). Kit Robinson underscores the “unassimilable resistance” of poems of this type, which “become variables in a kind of essay on history” (1995, 62). They are presented as personal, theoretical and as a dialectic of history and present.

² This significant aspect dominates much discussion of Watten’s *Under Erasure*, especially in Kit Robinson’s “Barrett Watten’s *Under Erasure*: ‘An Image of Nontotality in Indeterminate Frames’” (1995), and Bruce Andrews’s *Paradise & Method* (1996).

The forms used in Watten's composition with the aim of putting his poetics into practice are far from being a modernist collage. They lead us to perceive, first, the inherently autotelic nature of the poetic form, and, then, help us to historicize its materiality. Rather than impersonal, Watten's formal construction traces encounters due to a rhetorical effect with the pronoun system: "I/you/her or she/we/they—one of each occurs on each page" (Watten 1991a, n.p.). Another formal detail is centered on the original edition of this book. Watten wanted a design following logician-philosopher Stephen Toulmin's cover for *The Uses of Argument*, published in England in 1958 (Figure 1).³ He became fascinated with the three red arrows and small white circles in the design, similar to the syllogisms used as instruments for presenting and analyzing arguments. In this sense, the three arrows are closely connected with the three-line prose paragraphs in *Under Erasure*. Significantly, Watten wanted a graphic design with arrows associated with people commuting every morning in big cities, "[t]his is a (post) urban work" (Watten 1991a, n.p.). This persistence of commuting brings to mind the haunting effect of not only the continual movement of people but also its issues of space, time and cultural values.

FIGURE 1: Cover illustration of Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* (1958)
© Cambridge University Press

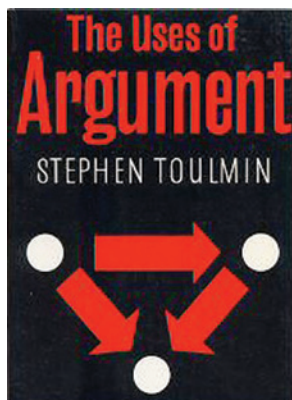
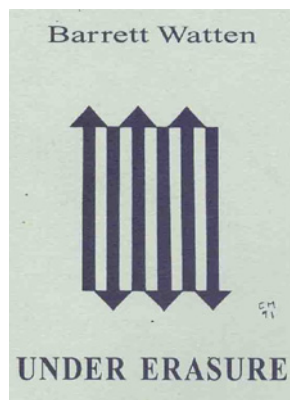


FIGURE 2: Cover illustration of Barrett Watten's *Under Erasure* (1991)
© Carlos Matallana 1991



Carlos Matallana's art on the cover of *Under Erasure* (Figure 2) is expressive in drawing vertical arrows with alternate directions flowing up and down, replicating the cover of Toulmin's book to refer metaphorically to the instability and ever-expanding reach of language and writing:

³ In Toulmin's model of analytical argument some basic components appear related to practical arguments: "claim," "data" and "warrant." Others like "qualifier," "backing" and "rebuttal" supplement his model. The diagram on Toulmin's book cover is based on the circularity needed to complete argumentation.

A lattice of commutes,
 whose routes
 Arrayed in color-coded dispatches... (Watten 1991b, 30)

Watten's labored formalistic structure corresponds to the unfolding of "historic and contemporary particulars" (Watten 2004, 14). This context embodies three different political events in the late decades of the twentieth century: the end of the Cold War, the Tiananmen Square protests and the fall of the Berlin Wall (15). Such categorical events are elucidated in Watten's introduction to *Progress/Under Erasure* as an account of the postmodern: "The postmodern, in the analogy of the poem, stands in relief against a historical horizon, an effect of certain cultural and political arrangements. Its defining terms are the dismantling of epochal representation in which memory—of actual events—and amnesia, in the displacement of cultural form—are the operative processes. Material monuments of the Cold War fall into an empty void at the end of representation" (15-16).

This poet's formal approach implies a poetics centered on "the self-reflexive mode of the 'making' of the work of art or cultural product [...] that creates grounds for new meaning" (Watten 2006, 335). His recurrent motif articulates "a world of surfaces, self-cancelling actions, and institutions that *Under Erasure* posits as the historical residue of its poetic claims" (Watten 2004, 16-17). Furthermore, by activating ellipsis at the end of each stanza in *Under Erasure*, Watten questions even the universalist assumptions about the materiality of language, revealing that this is attached to its web of further historical contingencies: "As the future cancels itself out, on a regular basis, a record can only remain in the discontinuities posited, even as in a form of analogy, by the split terms of the poem's argument with and against itself. Continuity is disrupted; representations fall" (17).

As with many other Language Poets, Watten's poetry is non-absorptive. Of course, there is a continuation of similar forms within the American poetry tradition preceding it. From Gertrude Stein to John Cage, such experimental poetry has reconstructed and motivated a new concept of the self, in order to observe its mysterious nature and the changes it has gone through when compared with what is considered rational. In proceeding this way, Watten prolongs the point of the signifier-signified relationship, though delving deeper into the sense of historical duration. Likewise, writing is an act that opens the door to remodelling and penetrating any field of human concern. The roles of structure, form and meaning constantly overlap in his work: "I saw my imperative as social, and poetry as a mode of production, but it is also discursive, requiring new formations of gender, race, and class" (Watten 2016, 223). This is one of the main reasons why Watten is a rule-breaker and re-interpreter, stimulating the reader to re-examine and question human culture and history from new angles.

Ultimately, this approach is not limited to the exclusively individual since Watten's texts expand through those of other authors and the daily realities of the Iraq War, the 1994 Los Angeles riots and O.J. Simpson on TV, as he explains in *Bad History* (1998,

15, 25, 118). Everything requires a resolution to shed light on social definition. In most of Watten's published work, for example *Progress* (1985), *Total Syntax* (1985), *Conduit* (1988), *Under Erasure* (1991) and *Bad History* (1998), he has always laid emphasis on the mode of poetic composition that sets off from exploration and gets in touch with the Other, always in search of new experimental forms that draw attention to history. Usually this form is governed by fixed stanzaic structures at least since *Complete Thought* (1982), assimilated to a nonnarrative poetics that points to language and non-closure: "Each word becoming the autofocus of its claims / (The endless poem a cascade of possible endings)" (Watten 1991b, 17).

From the beginning, especially through his job as editor of the little magazine *This* (1971-1982), Watten was involved in the Language Poets group, representing their public side. Their dilemma was always whether to break with the notion of a group to give free rein to the latent Other whilst not converting this into one's own double. Their common element was Watten's consideration of the poem as an artifact that resists the conventional. For instance, the model he propitiated in *Conduit* (1988) signaled his procedure in later books: "I wanted a sequence of linguistic artifacts at zero degree, where communication would be refigured toward a horizon that would force a recognition of the prevalent systems of metaphorical dread" (1995, 37). This is still observable in the greater part of his poetic production. In the same way, Watten has pushed for a continued commitment to practice in exploring and questioning the role of ideology within poetry.

By means of these conceptual and formal principles, Watten has investigated how to gain access to representation through nonrepresentation, simply by radically memorizing what was once culturally reduced. Anderson makes an important contribution by suggesting that memory retrieval is subject to a variety of cues: "Our memories are remarkably flexible; any aspect of the content of a memory can serve as a reminder that could access the experience, a property known as *content addressable* memory. We essentially have a mental 'search engine,' but we can search with just about any type of information" (2009, 165; emphasis in the original). Watten's *Under Erasure* points the way toward bringing specific targets into awareness. Furthermore, since he intentionally includes particular biographical and historical events in this poem, Watten also operates on the explicit memory, "based on recollecting personal events (episodic memory) or facts (semantic memory)," which Baddeley classifies within the long-term memory (2009b, 10). Watten's memory burden is lengthened with the data of experiences eventually going onto the page. While he is working specifically with words, parataxis and historical events, understanding how the poetry system works could help toward a new vision of reality. But this is not what drives him. He is writing because he wants to understand how poetry works, and he believes he has an obligation to find out: "Poetry enters the cultural order as an expansion of the object; the poet/critic is a site for questions of poetics" (Watten 2016, 223). On the cutting edge of this effort is a poet testing out the history he has experienced, who will thus write as his own control subject.

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