

Part One



Continuities

SRIKANTH REDDY

from *Voyager*

The world is the world.

To deny it is to break with reason.

Nevertheless it would be reasonable to question the affair.

The speaker studies the world to determine the extent of his troubles.

He studies the night overhead.

He says therefore.

He says venerable art.

To believe in the world, a person has to quiet thinking.

The dead do not cease in the grave.

The world is water falling on a stone.

Chapter 1



Voice and Erasure in Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager*

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This haunting series of assertions appears on the first page of Srikanth Reddy's long poem *Voyager* (2011).¹ The haunting effect has to do partly with the way each claim stands on a line of its own, emerging from and then echoing in the space that surrounds it. It also has to do with the fact that Reddy's poetry really *is* haunted: every word of *Voyager* has been taken from Kurt Waldheim's memoir of his career as Secretary General of the United Nations, *In the Eye of the Storm* (1985). "The dead do not cease in their grave" indeed.

To be clear: what Reddy is doing is not what modernist poets like Pound or Moore or Eliot do when they sample sources. Their borrowings most often involve a complete syntactic unit, a phrase or a sentence or more; the quoted speech is marked as such; and it's set inside the language of the poem quoting it, with the result that the distinction between the two texts, the one quoted from and the one doing the quoting, is more or less preserved. Here Reddy takes apart his source text bit by bit, at times isolating lexical units as small as a preposition or an article, to build new statements altogether—and *all* of his words come from Waldheim. The voice is therefore a weird composite, the triangulated expression of two authors that belongs to neither one precisely.

In this way *Voyager* presents a novel and I think distinctly contemporary instance of poetic difficulty. These opening lines require a reader to ask that basic discussion-starting question posed by the New Criticism: Who is speaking? But it is not a question that can be settled: even here, although far more troublesome passages await us in the poem, it could be asked of every sentence. And behind it, I'll suggest, are a number of other, rather odd questions: What is it like to be the speaker of a poem, or at least the speaker of a poem such as this? How does it feel when the central feeling expressed is an absence or (better) a dislocation of feeling? And along with these come questions about other sorts of coherence: How does one sentence (or how does one word or phrase) follow from another? What is the operative logic in a given sequence? What do Reddy's lines add up to? Later I will work through answers to these questions by looking carefully at the lines quoted above. But

the results will be of primarily local use because *Voyager* resists stable resolution as we move from one page to the next.

The difficulty of deciding who is speaking in *Voyager* is further compounded by the fact that each of its three main sections, or “books,” explores a distinct genre and formal plan. How the whole poem fits together is another difficulty, then, and a major one. *Voyager* is not a poem with a beginning, middle, and end, but a poem that begins and ends three times. Each iteration amounts to a particular event, a new reading, if you like, of *In the Eye of the Storm*. Which means that we must approach the poem as simultaneously an act of writing and an act of reading.

The poem’s technique, usually called “erasure,” is described quite explicitly in Book 2. “I began to cross out words from his book on world peace” (23), Reddy writes, referring to Waldheim and *In the Eye of the Storm*. Then he says again: “I had to cross out his world anew. This history is the effect of that curious process” (25). The process of “crossing out” Waldheim’s book is represented graphically elsewhere in *Voyager* when Reddy includes a bit of crossed-out text. In the poem’s epilogues (there are three, one for each book and the erasure that created it), crossing out takes over: here Reddy prints the epilogue to Waldheim’s memoir three times, striking through line after line of text, leaving only a few scattered words for readers to assemble in new sentences. A number of paratextual references call attention to the technique: Reddy mentions his erasure of Waldheim’s text in his acknowledgments; a blurb from Marjorie Perloff calls attention to Waldheim and the erasure technique on the back cover. Moreover, the method can be studied on a website to which the acknowledgments direct us, where Reddy has posted examples of his writing process.²

I’ll say more about the method and its implications shortly. What is Reddy doing when he applies it to *In the Eye of the Storm*? With its notorious falsification of Waldheim’s service as a Nazi SS officer who was in a position to be aware of, if not more directly involved in, war crimes committed by the German military in Greece and Yugoslavia, the memoir is not a promising starting place. There can be little point in arraigning Waldheim and exposing his self-representations as lies: that’s been done, and by scholars and journalists better equipped to do it than a poet.³ But Waldheim’s culpability is not the essential issue in *Voyager*. Rather, in Reddy’s poem Waldheim comes to stand for a general failure of humanistic ideals and democratic leadership, stretching beyond National Socialism and the Second World War to the democratic regimes that dominate the world today.

Or, because Reddy’s engagement is specifically with Waldheim’s language, it would be more accurate to say: Waldheim comes to stand for a failed way of speaking. Using Waldheim’s words, as he does everywhere in *Voyager*, Reddy sums up the case with irony and sympathy too: “This man, legend states, likely knew of the mass execution of groups of people as a capable officer required to collect and analyze data, prepare reports, conduct investigations,

and otherwise facilitate operational projects in the last world war. At the time, however, he did not express concern at this action. To a degree this is understandable. His voice failed" (21).

That failure of voice is complex. It involves two stages of denial and two silences, the second repeating while also covering up the first, as, over the decades, Waldheim first failed to speak against the "mass execution of groups of people" going on around him and then failed to speak of that wartime failure of protest. Moreover, Waldheim's failure was never a matter of saying nothing. Both silences were disguised by the fluent speech of a bureaucrat: "a capable officer" collecting and analyzing data, and then an international statesman recalling his actions on the world stage. Those roles and the discourses proper to them, no matter how distant from each other in style and function, are joined in the moral history of one man's voice.

Engaging with that history, Reddy tries to get inside Waldheim's voice, to anatomize, appropriate, and reformat it, and ultimately to rescue something from its ruins. Reddy seems interested specifically in the irony that this man whose voice conspicuously "failed" during the Second World War should have become a general "spokesman for humanity" in the postwar era. The role is epitomized by the message from Waldheim carried aboard the Voyager interstellar space probes launched by NASA in 1977. Speaking as the Secretary General of the United Nations, Waldheim offers "greetings on behalf of the people of our planet": "We step out of our solar system into the universe seeking only peace and friendship, to teach if we are called upon, to be taught if we are fortunate. We know full well that our planet and all its inhabitants are but a small part of this immense universe that surrounds us and it is with humility and hope that we take this step."⁴

The human collective unmarked by difference that Waldheim speaks for in this laughably vacuous message is as much a fantasy as the alien being he addresses. But Reddy takes his poem's title from the Voyager mission, and to that extent, he takes it very seriously (perhaps the poem is a machine bearing its record of life on earth into uncharted space?). Nor is Reddy ridiculing Waldheim when he describes him as "a man who by some quirk of fate had become a spokesman for humanity, who could give voice to all the nations and peoples of the world, and so to speak, the conscience of mankind." Waldheim's role as a spokesman for "all nations and peoples" descends from an Enlightenment ideal that is as much poetic as political. It is memorably articulated by Wordsworth: "In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time."⁵

There is no mention of Wordsworth in *Voyager*. But I think Reddy's poem asks by implication whether a vision of poetry such as this can be recovered and refashioned for our time—in spite of the global history of political

oppression, torture, and genocide, “in spite of things gone silently out of mind, and things violently destroyed,” which is the repressed subtext of Waldheim’s memoir. Reddy grasps *In the Eye of the Storm* as a grotesquely failed poem from which he will attempt to create a new and truer one. Humanity, he seems to say, goes on needing people who will try to speak for it.

Reddy’s ambivalent attitude toward Waldheim as spokesman has a parallel in the complex effects of his erasure technique, although the point of that technique appears simple enough on the face of it. The idea of a representative speaker implies in poetry a first-person lyric voice valued for originality and authenticity, invention and sincerity. (Again Wordsworth is a model.) The constraint Reddy works with throughout *Voyager*—his choice to use only Waldheim’s words and maintain the order in which they appear in the memoir—flies in the face of that idea: here is a long poem made entirely of someone else’s language.

Erasure literalizes, and so brings inescapably to mind, the truism that books are made out of other books. Precedents include the “treated” books of Marcel Bloodthayers, who blacked out the words of Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* (1969), highlighting the poem’s spatial arrangement, and Tom Phillips, whose work in progress, *A Humament* (begun in 1966), is made out of an obscure nineteenth-century novel. Ronald Johnson’s visionary redaction of *Paradise Lost*, *Radi os* (1976, reprinted in 2005), and Jen Bervins’s *NETS* (2004), based on Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, are other examples. Once an eccentric strategy, erasure has become a familiar practice, as inviting to intellectual younger poets as the sestina was thirty years ago. Along with other types of found text, it is a period-defining technique for an era when the conventions of lyric autobiography have been challenged by the antiexpressive, citational, procedural writing endorsed in Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2010).

In particular, *Voyager* shares a good deal with the “uncreative writing” on exhibit in Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011). But in Reddy, as opposed to conceptual writers like Dworkin and Goldsmith, the rejection of a Romantic, expressive poetics is not at all complete or programmatic. He is curious, rather, as to how erasure, this technique so associated with today’s critique of poetic voice and its allied values, once it is put to work on a manifestly “failed” voice, might generate a voice (or voices) with new expressive properties. So although Reddy himself uses it “for lack of a better word,” the term *erasure* hardly captures what he is doing.⁶ It implies silencing a voice rather than appropriating and reanimating it, and it calls to mind negation and aggression rather than collaboration (Reddy has said he feels “profoundly indebted to Waldheim as a literary collaborator”).⁷

To be sure, negation and aggression are part of the approach. This is emphatically so when Reddy draws a line through Waldheim’s words in his

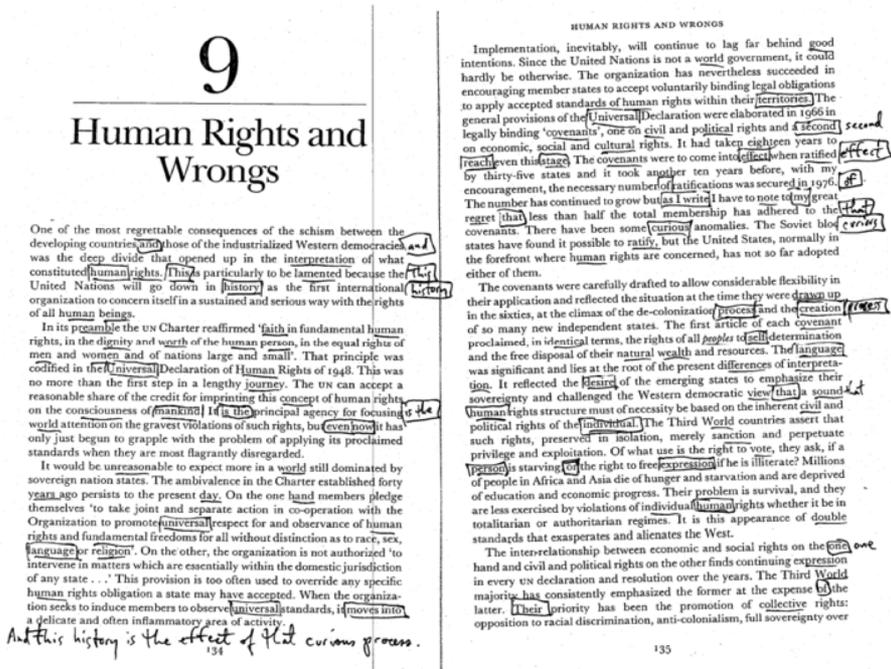


Figure 1.1. Worksheet from stage 1 in Reddy's erasure process (tiny.cc/voyagermethod). Note that Reddy ignores the chapter break in Waldheim's memoir as a unit of organization for his poem.

three epilogues. Those nine canceled pages highlight the defacement of text that underlies Reddy's process throughout the poem. Yet there's more to that process. On his *Voyager* website, Reddy divides the work of composition into three steps and gives samples of each. First, he marked up the text of *In the Eye of the Storm*, circling and underlining words and phrases (fig. 1.1). (He worked not on a bound copy of the book but on photocopies: it was always the text, rather than the physical object, that he was concerned with. This focus distinguishes his project from, among other practices, book art.) Then, in the process of selecting words, he "deleted language from the book, like a government censor blacking out words in a letter from an internal dissident," as he puts it on the website (fig. 1.2). This is the moment of "erasure" proper. Finally, he closed the space between selected words to create new syntactic and grammatical structures, introduced punctuation, and made choices of format and prosody, integrating what he had preserved of the memoir in a text of his own making. So the process included acts of cancellation, preservation, and reconfiguration.⁸

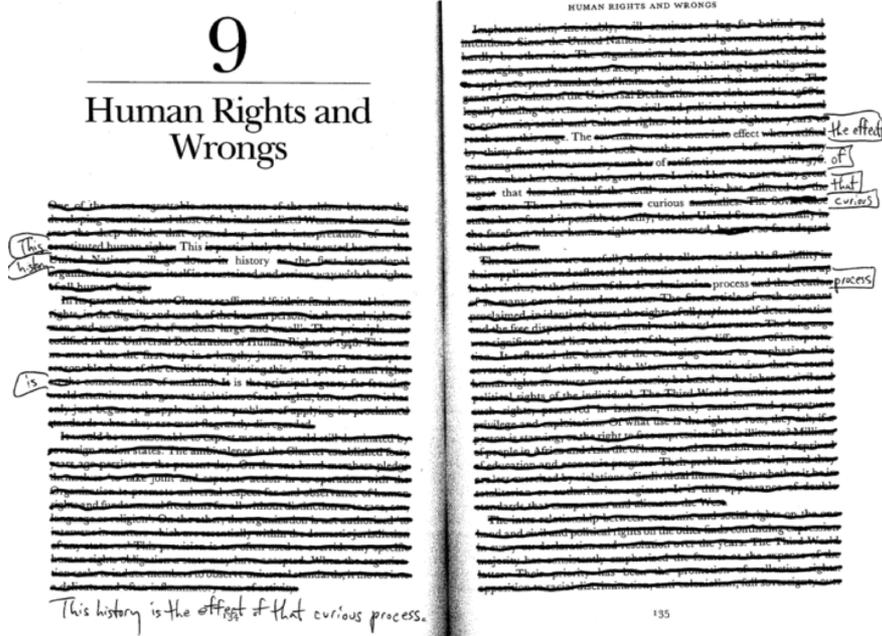


Figure 1.2. Worksheet from stage 2 (tiny.cc/voyagermethod). The sentence “This history is the effect of that curious process” follows “I had to cross out his world anew” in *Voyager*, Book Two (25).

On the one hand, this is a highly constrained, rule-driven means of writing poetry, binding the poet’s choice of words to a specific external lexicon. On the other hand, the freedom Reddy permits himself is notable. After all, the lexicon he draws on is a 268-page book. And while he confines himself to Waldheim’s words and the order in which he finds them, he crosses out as many pages as he likes before selecting the next word or phrase; he changes the grammatical function of words and phrases when he wishes; and he freely creates his own rhythms and images, inventing personages, place names, and a great deal more. The poem is not an attempt to write poetry “for” Waldheim as if it were some kind of dramatic monologue; there is never an issue of verisimilitude. From this perspective, Reddy’s method looks less like a refusal of “originality” than a peculiarly elaborate means of achieving it.

Guiding each erasure, as I’ve said, were decisions about the genre and prosody Reddy would employ. In Book 1, he daringly eliminates the grammatical basis of Waldheim’s memoir—the first-person pronoun—to create a different sort of text entirely, made up of sequences of impersonal prose statements, ten to a page. The question seems to be, can Waldheim’s text, despite itself, be made to yield a philosophy, an impersonal discourse of truth

we can apply to the ongoing violence of our world? Reddy's model is the propositional structure of a text like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, to the famous first sentence of which ("The world is everything that is the case") the start of *Voyager* alludes: "The world is the world." Wittgenstein's reasoning, however, is parodied more than emulated in the statements that follow, which involve a critique of the official rationality embedded in Waldheim's prose and perhaps a critique of rationality as such, viewed as the will to order the world intellectually. Let's look back now at those opening lines to examine that critique and the interpretive difficulties it entails: Who is speaking? How does one claim follow from another?

The initial tautology does not at first seem like the start of any train of thought. It expresses a simple, seemingly irrefutable realism, a rationality based on common sense: the world is the world we all know, *QED*. But the poem immediately throws that idea into question. Though presented as another statement of fact, the second sentence's abrupt defense of the first makes it feel like a warning: if we deny that the world is the world and claim that it is merely "a" world, implying that other worlds, or at least other accounts of this one, are possible, we will violate the rules of legitimate thought and be judged out of bounds, beyond reason. The second sentence now makes the first appear less simple and assured and more like an attempt to forestall objections that we didn't know had been raised but are already present by implication, motivating the poem to start with. What counts as "reason" seems brittle and easily disturbed: an official picture of the real, held in place by rhetorical force.

As if to acknowledge that weakness, the third sentence allows that our definition of what is "reasonable" must be stretched far enough "to question the affair." That's a significant adjustment: rather than reason in the abstract, Reddy has introduced the pragmatic category of the reasonable, a matter of social consensus more than logic or principle. There is a modulation in diction too audible in the puffed-up assertiveness of "nevertheless," the hedging, stilted elegance of the conditional ("it would be"), the vagueness and euphemism of "to question the affair." The last word resonates because the controversy precipitated by *In the Eye of the Storm* is known as "the Waldheim affair." Here, as so often in *Voyager*, Reddy precisely catches the tone of official muddle and obfuscation. This is highly self-conscious speech, attempting to manage the impression it makes through carefully counterbalanced weights and measures, the cumulative effect of which is to say nothing concrete, nothing particular, and in that respect, nothing at all.

It's tempting to identify the speaker "who studies the world to determine the extent of his troubles" as Waldheim himself, emerging as a character in the poem. But "the speaker" is pointedly unspecific. He is a *rückenfigur* whom we encounter as an outline without face or identity, engaged in meditation on the world, possibly of the sort the poem itself is engaged in, as if Reddy had taken a step back to show us the person speaking the poem's opening lines. That

term—*the speaker*—neatly holds together political and poetic models of representation: we use it to indicate the leader of a democratic assembly and the voice in a poem. Both operate by means of convention and formal arrangement; and both are suspect as frayed, if not failed, ideals, masking particular biases and interests behind the claim to representativeness. To reassert his authority in the face of these “troubles,” the speaker appeals to logic (“therefore”) and the traditions of high culture (“venerable art”). But the repetition of “he says” makes his discourse seem like a matter of rote, without specific content or point. That the speaker is male is important and not a surprise.

Having moved over the space of a few lines from propositional reasoning to description of a man thinking, Reddy suddenly reverts to a proposition: “To believe in the world”—to be able to say, “The world is the world” with simple confidence—“one has to quiet thinking.” “Reason,” as we suspected, turns out to require the suppression of thinking. But why does thinking threaten our belief in the world? Reddy answers the implied question by mentioning the dead who “do not cease in the grave.” To think is to enter into the silences in the historical record and there, as in a burial ground, to encounter the “disappeared” and “silent,” all the people murdered in the wars that have shaped the map of nations, our picture of the world as it is.⁹ “The dead do not cease” because, precisely in their silence, they clamor for expression and recognition.

Their restless condition is refigured when this series of statements ends by revising the first. The world is not the world; it is “water falling on a stone.” Instead of tautology, we have a metaphor. It implies that the world is not a noun but a participle, not a static fact but an ongoing event. A collision of opposites, unstoppable and ungraspable, it is not to be accounted for by rational propositions moving in series toward a conclusion, in the form of a proof. To represent it truly, a text would have to be more like an explosion, or a fire.

The page of poetry I’ve just been describing is like a debate within a mind, or between two minds, or perhaps within a discourse attached to no mind in particular that is pushed forward, forced this way and that, by the pressure of facts that threaten its claim to reason and mastery, as Reddy deconstructs the rationality of Waldheim’s writing to see what thoughts it represses and what other ways of thinking it might make available. That deconstruction works by disassembling sentences and assembling new ones from the scattered parts. Its halting, probing rhythms are a record of Reddy’s experience as a reader of Waldheim’s memoir, and they reproduce a version of that experience for his reader.

Erasure, Reddy has commented, “became like a form of reading, or detection. Which made me feel . . . that writing is itself a form of reading” (“The Weight of What’s Left [Out]”). To examine his compositional process on his website is indeed to observe someone reading—or perhaps learning to read?

That is, as he marks up his source text, pointing up parts of speech, attending less obviously to “content” than to grammar and syntax, circling or underlining words and phrases to return to, Reddy behaves like the student of a foreign language, diagramming a text to absorb what he can for practical use.

The interesting turn is that the foreign language Reddy uses the memoir to learn is English. Importantly, *In the Eye of the Storm* is an English-language work, not a translation of Waldheim's native German.¹⁰ Only that's not precise enough: what Reddy is trying to “learn” is no one's native tongue. Only acquired through long training and acculturation, it is the contemporary language of power, of bureaucracy and business, the idiom of expert rationality familiar to us from press conferences, policy statements, media interviews, and the like. This is a variety of English as exchangeable and placeless as the architecture of corporate offices and airport hotels; it aspires to the prestige and authority of universal reference that any merely national language by definition lacks.

The special contemporaneity of Reddy's poem and much of the difficulty it involves reflect his engagement, through Waldheim's memoir, with a specific postwar phenomenon: the rise of English as the default public discourse of global elites. What are the qualities of that discourse? Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre have tracked the evolution of one variant—which, echoing Orwell's *1984*, they call “Bankspeak”—by undertaking a quantitative linguistic analysis of the World Bank's annual reports since 1950.¹¹ What they describe is suggestive though scarcely surprising: from the 1970s onward, the language of the World Bank's reports has grown increasingly abstract. This development is reflected in, among other features, the proliferation of nominalizations—nouns, usually Latinate ones, made out of verbs. Absorbing and obscuring the actions they refer to, the nominalizations in these reports tend to blur reference to concrete political and economic realities, and make human subjects disappear. Along with this abstraction comes an indeterminacy of time and place that Moretti and Pestre demonstrate also on the levels of grammar and rhetoric.

Their research seeks to get inside the linguistic operations of the “management discourse” that dominates the world economy (in which the noun *management* is among the most frequently used) to call attention to its construction and analyze its repressed logic, in more or less the same way that Orwell, insisting on the concrete effects of state policy and war, approaches political and military propaganda in “Politics and the English Language.” With pen and ink rather than computers and graphs, Reddy does something similar to *In the Eye of the Storm*. But the World Bank's annual report is not the same thing as a statesman's memoir. As opposed to Moretti and Pestre, Reddy is concerned with a literary question: How does a bureaucratic discourse affect the one who inhabits it? Is it possible, and if so what is it like, to experience the world subjectively in language that turns human subjects into abstractions and makes them disappear?

These questions emerge forcefully in Book 2 of *Voyager*. In Book 1, Reddy's daring move was to remove Waldheim's first person. In Book 2, daring now in an entirely different way, Reddy restores Waldheim's "I" and uses it to speak about his own experience, according to the conventions of autobiography. In blocks of prose, one to the page, Book 2 offers lyric introspection of a type found in a private journal or memoir. The nature of the world—and of world-making—is in question again, but this time the point of view is highly personal. For instance: "As a child, spelling out *world* was to open a world in myself, private and byzantine, with mountains by a pale, fragile sea, the coast stretching southwards in the curtained evening hours" (23). Or again: "In my office a globe was set up, less a world than a history of imperialism and corruption. I used to search that poor political patchwork in the period leading up to my tenure" (25). Reddy's use of *In the Eye of the Storm* to describe (or seem to describe) the inner world of his childhood or his daily life "in the period leading up to my tenure" is a remarkable feat. But it's not a naturalistic illusion he is going for. Rather, his prose is calculatedly impersonal (the use of the passive voice in "was to open" or "was set up"), not at all colloquial ("private and byzantine," "pale, fragile sea," "the curtained evening hours"), and subtly fragmentary in grammar (the intransitive use of *search*). These effects keep reminding us that Reddy's sentences are made out of quotation and echo with the odd formality of their source.

They also underline a certain stitched-together quality in Waldheim's writing that is easy to overlook, given its smooth contours and appearance of rational control. Yet, on inspection, Waldheim's not-quite-idiomatic idioms give his style the feeling of an acquired language, meticulously spoken. The foreword to *In the Eye of the Storm* begins this way:

This is not a book of memoirs in the ordinary sense, nor is it a comprehensive account of events during my term of office as Secretary General of the United Nations. Had I embarked upon either task, it would have taken me far beyond the confines of this present endeavor.

Instead I have attempted to offer some insight into my background, actions, and aspirations. Without dwelling upon the routine and frustrations that are also the hallmarks of any arduous career, I have described those events and episodes which I feel bear some significance for the course of history. (*In the Eye of the Storm*, vii)

There is perfect confidence in this writing; nothing ruffles its surface. Yet phrases like "had I embarked upon either task," "far beyond the confines of this present endeavor," or "the hallmarks of any arduous career" feel as though they have been cut out of a thesaurus and taped in, one after another. Put that diction together with the studied casualness of "offer some insight into" and the self-regarding modesty of "bear some significance for the

course of history,” noting the strategic vagueness of both phrases,¹² as well as the fact that the author's feelings, if not missing, are prim and disciplined, and you have a good sense of Waldheim's prose style throughout *In the Eye of the Storm*.

Probably the style interests Reddy because Waldheim's voice, unlike Milton's or Shakespeare's (the canonical poetic sources for Ronald Johnson's and Jen Bervins's erasures), is a mode of official expression, not simply prosaic or subliterary but generic. The sound of a person comes through, but it is the sound of a person struggling to make himself present—and to conceal himself too; a person struggling to sound statesmanlike *and* intimate, trying to project personality in a formal idiom that is a little too weighty, a little inexact, and in those ways not fully controlled, despite the effort to control it. The style is the product of a patient, incomplete effort to construct a plausible speaker. Reddy makes the point concisely in Book 1: “He wrote formally in private” (13). Or better still: “Kurt Waldheim is a formal negotiation” (15).

By adapting this style to describe his own experience, Reddy experiments with a provocative overlay of perspectives. Already in Book 1 the ambiguous identity of “the speaker” had been a way to play with this idea. “He had a professorship at the university and had been out of contact with his personality as a result” (8), Reddy writes, and his readers who are university professors can laugh—at the idea that being a professor puts one in danger of losing touch with one's personality and at Reddy's impersonal phrasing of the idea. It doesn't matter whom *he* refers to precisely: Waldheim, Reddy, or no one in particular. For no one in the generic, representative role of a “speaker” is quite himself. Even a professor-poet like Reddy, despite the content of his work and the freedoms he enjoys, occupies a position on a continuum with other bureaucratic roles, all of which entail some objectification, some submission to an institutional identity and official function, separating a person and his personality. That condition is expressed in Reddy's style, derived from Waldheim's.

The glimpses that Reddy gives of his life in the university include reflections on the obsessive activity of erasing Waldheim's memoir: “To cross line after line out of his work seemed to me a slow and difficult process that verged on the ridiculous” (23). He wrote *Voyager* over a six-year period (2003–9) during which the United States invaded Iraq and Afghanistan. In Book 2 Reddy comments on those wars and the protests they stirred: “As I write these lines, people with pictures of people killed in action run through New York's traffic-choked streets, rising to the spirit of the occasion, while I, sitting in my second-floor office connected to various communication cables, maintain control over some very unruly emotional forces” (30). In contrast to the demonstrators who are “rising to the spirit of the occasion” (a strange phrase in this context), Reddy tries to control his emotions (or no: “some

very unruly emotional forces” is more controlled and impersonal than that). He remains tethered to his “second-floor office” by the “various communication cables” that are supposed to connect him to the world outside. He is not so unlike a young “capable officer” busy collecting and analyzing data while “the mass execution of groups of people” goes on elsewhere.

Dryly, with implications for himself as much as Waldheim, Reddy notes: “It was difficult to see how to stop the activities of the government” (25). The passive construction (“it was difficult”) and Latinate euphemism (“the activities of the government”) with which Reddy sums up his situation belong to a neutral, professorial mode of speaking that comes with his office and communication equipment. That idiom uncomfortably reproduces features of the official discourse of the government itself. In its flatness and impersonality and its careful imprecision, Reddy’s autobiographical writing merges with a general discourse of power that, perhaps especially when fluently spoken by persons in authority (that is, by designated “speakers”), involves an observable, deliberate caution, a testing of words, meant to manage and defuse potentially explosive or flammable contents, conveying self-possession while also suggesting the difficulty of achieving it (and therefore pointing to the opposite).

As an act of reading, Reddy’s erasure explores that process of searching for words, probing Waldheim’s style for its feints and fissures, even as it writes another version of them, entailing its own careful searching. The activity sets Reddy against Waldheim and forces on him a partial identification with Waldheim too. This passage is the climax of Book 2:

To cross scenes out of a text would not be to reject the whole text. Rather, to cross out a figure such as *to carry out programmes they approve the various regional economic commissions and inter-governmental bodies* sometimes increases the implications. I had hoped to voice my unhappiness in the world thus. More and more, it seems to me the role of the Secretary General in this book is that of an *alter ego*. In a nightmare, Under Secretaries General, Assistant Secretaries General, and other officials of rank reported directly to me. I was given an office and a globe. But I wondered why the forest just beyond the window seemed so cold when it was, to be sure, rapidly burning. (31)

“Carry out the bodies”: the phrase (sentence fragment or imperative?) first appeared in Book 1 (10). Here Reddy shows us the erasure process by which he created it. The words he crosses out could have come from any World Bank annual report analyzed by Moretti and Pestre. The concrete is recovered, as Orwell would wish, when Reddy excavates “the bodies”—the dead—from the ponderous bureaucratic jargon that obscured their fate. Or

perhaps “carry out the bodies” is an encoded order instructing who can read it not to recover and speak for the dead, as Reddy tries to, but to get them off the scene and hide them better. Either way the point holds. Murder is embedded in the muddling, boring rhetoric of bureaucratic authority.

In voicing his “unhappiness in the world” by erasing Waldheim’s voice, Reddy has drawn closer to him, rather than the opposite. The “role of the Secretary General in this book,” in *Voyager*, seems to be “that of an *alter ego*.” Which is not surprising; that is what a poetic speaker is supposed to be. The twist is that Waldheim serves in this way because his “I” is an alter ego, an effigy, from Waldheim’s own point of view. Reddy can identify with Waldheim as he speaks of himself in his memoir not because he sincerely articulates deep sentiments we all share but because his alienation from himself in discourse, his mendacity and obscurity, which we feel in the stilted, slightly unnatural quality of his prose, models the power of professional identity and bureaucratic function to modify anyone’s speech and thinking—which Reddy feels as a professor who has been “given an office and a globe.” The mediated condition of his perspective makes for a paradoxical knowledge: the window of the professor’s office shows him the world and bars him from it. The trees out there are as numerous and indistinct as “groups of people”: a forest of data, waiting to be analyzed. Although it “seems so cold” to him, he knows very well that the wood is on fire.

That image disturbingly captures the sensation of cognitive dissonance—call it the feeling of not-feeling—when there is a disjunction between what we know to be the case and what we can fully admit into consciousness, which is to say, what we can both state and feel. The effect involves a curious lyricism whereby self-expression is routed elaborately through a text that voices the muted, inaccessible feelings of another man. Reddy voices a very personal “unhappiness in the world” by erasing—but in the process, absorbing and reanimating—someone else’s voice, which is itself the product of “a formal negotiation,” a kind of writing involving a painstaking process of analysis and selection we might just as well call “reading.” In this way Reddy revisits and redefines Waldheim’s role as spokesman: the “I” of *In the Eye of the Storm* turns out to be transferable to Reddy and to that extent representative, as the speaker of a lyric poem is supposed to be. But again it is not the unity of a self and its expression but the distance between them in his case that makes Waldheim available as an alter ego for Reddy.

Books 1 and 2 of *Voyager* are a preface to Book 3, which is more than twice the length (eighty pages) of the other two combined. Book 3 presents a Dantesque dream vision in which the first-person narrator descends into the past, is brought before a distinctly bureaucratic council in “an abandoned fortress” (39), and compelled to tell his life story. The narrator of Book 3 is addressed as “Waldheim” (45). But surely Reddy, having successfully contrived to make Waldheim speak for him in Book 2, is now speaking for

Waldheim. What precisely would that mean? In the strange discursive space constituted by the poem, Reddy is making Waldheim face, and making himself feel what it would be like for Waldheim to face, everything his account of the world repressed. There is perhaps nothing so extraordinary about this: Reddy is putting words to what Waldheim was silent about, as others have done in their engagements with the Waldheim affair. But the trick is that these are Waldheim's words; and, by using them, what Waldheim could not admit to knowing and feeling, Reddy and his reader can.

Notes

1. Srikanth Reddy, *Voyager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3. Further page references to *Voyager* appear in parentheses in the text.

2. The website link given in *Voyager*, tiny.cc/voyagermethod, is no longer live.

3. For an introduction to the controversy, see the newspaper and magazine obituaries following Waldheim's death in 2007. *The Waldheim Report* was produced for the Austrian state by the International Commission of Historians (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, University of Copenhagen) in 1993.

4. See "The Golden Record" page on the Voyager website, <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html>.

5. William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," in *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Henry Reed (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1851), 666.

6. Reddy, "Note on the Process" (tiny.cc/voyagermethod).

7. Reddy quoted in Andrew King, "The Weight of What's Left [Out]: Six Contemporary Erasureists on Their Craft," <http://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/11/erasure-collaborative-interview/>.

8. The three dimensions of *aufheben* in the Hegelian dialectic. Reddy doesn't make anything of that connection. But he is likely to be familiar with Hegel's radical descendant, Walter Benjamin, and Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where the concept is invoked to describe the work of the materialist historiographer who "blasts open" the official historical record (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1968], 262–63).

9. The cover of *Voyager* is a detail from an altered book by Brian Dettmer called *Prevent Horizon* (2008): a road atlas of the United States that has been cut up in irregular patterns and hollowed out, converting the flat surfaces of the map into a series of planes, creating shadows and depth, bringing disparate places into disorienting configurations, and seeming to move ever inward, rather than outward, where the horizon usually points.

10. *In the Eye of the Storm: The Memoirs of Kurt Waldheim* was published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London) in 1985. *Im Glaspalast Der Weltpolitik* (In the Glass Palace of World Politics), the German version, appeared the same year from Econ (Düsseldorf/Vienna) in a translation from the English by Johannes Eidlitz and Gunther Martin.

11. Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre, "Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports," *New Left Review* 92 (March–April 2015).

12. On the ways Waldheim confusingly represents the generic status of his memoirs in the English version of the foreword, see Jacqueline Vansant, "Political Memoirs and Negative Rhetoric: Kurt Waldheim's *In the Eye of the Storm* and *Im Glaspalast Der Weltpolitik*," *Biography* 25, no. 2 (2002): 343–62.

