

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: GRAMMAR DEGREE ZERO

“And therefore when you have used all your cramping-irons to the text [...] it will be but a piece of frugal nonsense. But if your meaning be with a violent hyperbaton to transpose the text, as if the words lay thus in order...”

- John Milton

The book you are holding contains each and every one of the 223,704 words of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* - in random order. A concrete instantiation of a work of potential literature, *Re-Writing Freud* is the output from an eponymous new media work by Simon Morris. Realized with the technical assistance of Christine Morris, *Re-Writing Freud* constructs an inscriptive relay, or *Aufschreibesystem*, linking readers to Freud's text through a touch-screen interface with a computer program. That program randomly selects words from Freud's book, one at a time, and - after what often appears to be some moment of deliberation or hesitation, thanks to a random timing element - deposits them in a new sequence. Documenting one complete run of that program, this book is an instance or example, a point of singularity in a nearly infinite series of possible books, all essentially the same, and each absolutely unique. It took a little over three days to write.

Re-Writing Freud is at once unlike any other work I know and strongly evocative of a number of other textual adventures. Most obviously, it extends Tristan Tzara's famous recipe for writing a Dadaist poem to marathon lengths: “Prenez un jour-

nal. / Prenez des ciseaux.... [Take a newspaper. / Take some scissors....]"¹ Accordingly, it looks back to the modernist collage poems of Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, and to the more recent cut-up prose of Gil Wolman, Brion Gysin, and William Burroughs.² At the same time, it also shares affinities with the comprehensive re-writing of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*, in which all of the words from one day's *New York Times* are retyped and re-presented in book form. Similarly, Morris' book also recalls more localized literary transplants like Raymond Queneau's *Les Fondements de la littérature* and Paul Braffort's *Le Désir (les désirs) dans l'ordre des amours*, which substitute key vocabulary from one text with terms from another.³ Those latter works are cousins of the *chimère*, an oulippean literary form in a which all of the words from a given catagorematic set (nouns, adjectives, verbs, *et cetera*) are removed from one source text and replaced with the grammatically corresponding words from another. Michael Klauke's chimerical book *ad infinitum*, for instance, reassembles vocabulary from a rotating series of classical, critical, and literary sources into the grammatical frame of Honoré de Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*. So where Balzac's story famously opens, "I was deep in one of those daydreams which overtake even the shallowest of men, in the midst of the most tumultuous parties," Klauke's text begins: "Her was much in far of twilight these reported stately the little from world, of the sky to several plump sister." Where *Sarrasine* concludes, "And the Marquise remained pensive," *ad infinitum* ends: "And a Concerto suffering unlikely."⁴

Klauke's language generates its frisson from the disjunction between the syntactic form of Balzac's sentences, the basic structures of which remain palpably legible, and the accidentence of the transplanted words' grammatical forms, which refuse to be agreeably assimilated to their new position through rein-

flection or new conjugations. Morris' book, in contrast, presents language at the zero degree of grammar: a syntactic horizon beyond semanticity itself. Klauke's re-writing, in other words - however ungrammatically it stumbles, clunks and glitches - still retains a background against which an evaluation about grammatical competency can be made. With *Re-Writing Freud*, judgments about sense no longer themselves make any sense. The reader who responds to this book by complaining that it is nonsensical is neither right nor wrong, but asking the wrong question, posing an impossible problem in response to this book's insistent imaginary solution.

By severing those grammatical bonds, Morris has managed the emancipation of syntax. Without the pretext that its words are being articulated together into larger syntactic units, his book is able to attempt something like a lexical parataxis. If "paratactic" usually describes a nonhierarchical relationship between sentences (or propositions or clauses), here we might understand it to describe the relationship between words, each one of which is placed equally beside the next: discrete, un-subordinated, insubordinate.

Perhaps the closest analogue to *Re-Writing Freud* is musical rather than literary: Stephane Ginsburgh's elaboration on Marcel Duchamp's concept of an aleatory *Erratum Musical*.⁵ Duchamp wrote two texts under the title of a "musical misprint." The first, a three part song composed with Duchamp's sisters Yvonne and Magdeleine, sets the text of a dictionary definition for *imprimer* [*to print*] to musical lines composed by randomly drawing a shuffled set of notes. The libretto, with its evocation of wax cylinders and the sense of "scoring" a surface, emphasizes the textual nature of musical scores and hints that the randomizing method of musical composition might be brought back to literature: "*Faire une empreinte; marquer des*

traits; une figure sur une surface; imprimer un scau sur cire [To make an imprint; to mark with lines; a figure on a surface; to impress a seal in wax].”⁶ The second piece, a series of suggestive notes organized under the title *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même: Erratum Musical*, appears to describe an apparatus for generating a randomized distribution of eighty-five numbers, with obvious musical implications (at the time, the number of keys on a standard piano totaled eighty-five). Ginsburgh’s realization takes its cue from the impulse behind these works and updates them for the modern piano’s range of eighty-eight keys. As he describes it:

le principe de l’erratum musical est simple: on choisit un clavier – n’importe quel clavier – on tire chaque note au hasard – aucune note n’est renouvelée mais toutes sont frappées [the principle of musical erratum is simple: you take a keyboard – any keyboard – you draw each note at random – no note can be struck twice, but all are struck].⁷

The result, equally freed from both dissonance and harmony alike, has no sustained or developing structure. At any given moment, a note appears isolated in the timbre of its octave, correlated to adjacent notes with only the temporary suggestion of their musical relationship. Fragments of harmonic lines assemble and collapse as the meaning of each interval must be continually revised in light of the unfolding precession of further terms in an ultimately unsustainable syntax. The mind’s ear tries to remember the sum of passing intervals, but without the ability to incorporate them into larger identifiable units each note inevitably lapses back into silence, surrendered to the presence of the currently sounding tone, itself soon to give way to another newly isolated note in its turn. Ginsburgh’s *Erratum*, in short, permits a series of anarchic musical *situations*: transient, ad hoc alliances of small bands of radically

discrete individual agents which coalesce and dissolve through brackets of time in convulsively beautiful ludic misbehavior, illumination, perfection, and abuse.

None of which is to suggest that *Re-Writing Freud* is without a firm linguistic form, only that its structures are not to be found at the level of grammar (between words) or syntax (between sentences) or sound. If literary form has most often been felt at the level of the syllable or phoneme - rhymed along alliterative lines or spaced in neat repeated feet - the form of *Re-Writing Freud* can be found at the level of the book (in the same way that the form of Ginsburgh's *Erratum Musical* can be found at the level of the keyboard). With a scrupulous formalism, Morris' version of Freud's text follows the conventions of typographic layout found in the 1976 Penguin edition of Freud's work, replicating its chapter divisions and the length of its paragraphs. The words that fill out the frame of those sections, however, are drawn not from the Penguin volume, which reprints James Strachey's translation for the Standard Edition, but from the 1913 translation by A. A. Brill, which follows the third German edition of 1911.⁸ This discrepancy is not coincidental. The more recent edition of Freud's text used by Penguin is still under copyright, while Brill's translation of the earlier edition has passed into the public domain. Available free of charge in an on-line digital format, Brill's text can now be copied and appropriated with mechanical ease; it provided a readymade database for Morris' interface. The bibliographic structure of *Re-Writing Freud* may be the first literary form created by lawyers.

Although the particular editions and translations vary in this way, the choice of Freud's text for randomization is far from arbitrary. *Re-Writing Freud* literalizes a number of terms from Freudian psychology, redeploying them in their textual rather

than psychological senses: recovering, derangement, displacement, aphasia, and all of the cutting that throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams* signifies castration. Moreover, the cut-up method of *Re-Writing Freud* resonates with Freud's own descriptions of his analytic method and the mechanisms of dream-work under discussion: material "cut up and slightly altered" in "arbitrary improvisations," or "particular elements which were originally indifferent [and] are indifferent no longer" because of a "displacement which replaces psychically important by indifferent material." Most striking, from this perspective, is the passage in which Freud relates: "If I say to a patient who is still a novice: 'What occurs to you in connection with this dream?', as a rule his mental horizon becomes a blank. If, however, I put the dream before him cut up into pieces, he will give me a series of associations to each piece...."

Without the filter of human psychology to make such associations meaningful, *Re-Writing Freud* tries to place its language beyond analysis, not only in the grammatical sense but in the psychoanalytic sense as well. Indeed, Morris' work would seem to be an attempt to thwart the symbolic itself, and to momentarily snare some fragment of the real. Through the ruse of chance, his stratagem of stepping back and leaving the writing to the computer, Morris presents a glimpse of how language - the symbolic system underwriting the symbolic dream-work that articulates our psychological symbolic order - might appear in the guise of the real: a sheer inexpressive materiality composed *of* language, but no longer functioning *as* language.

But that unmediated real is of course an impossibility. We still recognize even the most non-referential language as part of a symbolic system, and in *Re-Writing Freud* we can clearly see the return of its repressed referential drive. In the midst of

Morris' deep REM dream of the real, language itself appears as the patient under an interminable analysis, with all its symptoms on display: deictic tics, compulsive gestures of reference, the hypnagogic flashes and hauntings of the signifier, any number of morose delectations. Language simply cannot help itself. And we realize, reading this book, that we can't do anything for it. It is *through* and not in spite of its methods that "the book dreams" of the "coherence of nonsensical" "chance activity."⁹ In precisely those moments of this text where even the screen of chance cannot prevent two adjacent words from unexpectedly making sense, or suggesting a common unwritten third term, where themes emerge like shared secrets between certain words, where the very materiality meant to obviate reference only allows language to point back to itself in a series of differences and repetitions, in the rubbing of one word against the next, we catch language in its ceaseless symptomatic acts and assignations: dangerous idiomatic liaisons, anxious avoidances, teasing connotations, flirtations with syntax, illicit frictions, incestuous marriages of words with shared etymological lineages, narcissistic mirrorings, and all the perverse and unnatural combinations of aberrant ungrammatical coupling we cannot, as readers, resist seeing as such.

Don't look away - for therein lies the lesson of the aleatory text: so many graces of fate, so many fates of grace.

NOTES:

1 *Dada manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer*, section VIII (*La Vie des lettres* 4 [Paris: Jacques Povolozky & Cie., April 1921], reprinted in *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. I [Paris: Flammarion, 1975]: 382).

2 See, for instance, *J'écris propre: récit détourné* (*Les Lèvres nues* 9 [1956], reprinted in *Défense de mourir* [Paris: Editions Allia, 2001]: 114-133); *Minutes to Go* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1968); and *The Ticket That Exploded* (New York: Grove, 1967). Burroughs' conception of language as a virus of recombina-

nant mutations has been a key metaphor for Morris' own understanding of his project, which realigns Burroughs' figure of alien biology with the (not unrelated) terms of malevolent computer code. See William S. Burroughs, *Electronic Revolution* (Bonn: Expanded Media Editions, 1982): 59.

3 Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington: The Figures, 2003); *Bibliothèque Oulipienne* No. 3 (Paris, 1976; reprinted in *OuLiPo Laboratory: Texts From The Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, Anti-Classics No. 4 [London: Atlas Press, 1996]) and *Bibliothèque Oulipienne* No. 18 (Paris, 1982). One might further compare these latter works with Louis Zukofsky's procedure in "A"-9, where vocabulary from two sources (Karl Marx's *Capital* and H. Stanley Allen's *Electrons and Waves: An Introduction to Atomic Physics*) are fit into the form of another (Guido Cavalcanti's canzone "Donna mi prega"); see "A" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): 106-111. Similarly, one could extend the genre to include compositions with restricted, found vocabulary, such as Kit Robinson's *The Dolch Stanzas* (San Francisco: This Press, 1976) or Laura Elrick's *sKincerity* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2003), among others.

4 Honoré de Balzac: *Sarrasine*, translated by Richard Miller in Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974): 211-254. Michael Klauke: *ad infinitum* (Charlotte: Nexus Press, 1987).

5 Marcel Duchamp, *Erratum Musical: 7 variations on a draw of 88 notes* SR183 (Brussels: subrosa, 2000).

6 See *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, edited by Richard Hamilton and translated by George Hamilton (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1960): n.p..

7 *Erratum Musical*, *op. cit.*

8 For comparison, see *The Penguin Freud Library*, Volume IV, translated by James Strachey (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976); *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IV (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958); *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated A. A. Brill (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1913); and *Die Traumdeutung* (Leipzig: Franz Deuticke, 1911). For *Re-Writing Freud*, the footnotes, three prefaces, and two bibliographies found in the Allen edition have been absorbed into the main text.

9 See the present volume: 88; 363; 655.