



A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel

Tom Phillips

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In the mid-1960s, Tom Phillips took a forgotten nineteenth-century novel, W. H. Mallock's A Human Document, and began cutting and pasting the extant text to create something new. The artist writes, 'I plundered, mined and undermined its text to make it yield the ghosts of other possible stories, scenes, poems, erotic incidents and surrealist catastrophes which seemed to lurk within its wall of words. As I worked on it, I replaced the text I'd stripped away with visual images of all kinds. I began to tell and depict, among other memories, dreams and reflections, the sad story of Bill Toge, one of love's casualties.' After its first publication in book form in 1980, A Humument rapidly became a cult classic. This new fourth edition follows its predecessors by incorporating revisions and re-workings -- over half the pages in the 1980 edition are replaced by new versions -- and celebrates an artistic enterprise that is nearly forty years old and still actively a work in progress.

A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel Details

Date : Published April 1st 2005 by Thames & Hudson (first published October 1st 1980)

ISBN : 9780500285510

Author : Tom Phillips

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From Reader Review A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel for online ebook

Glenn says

An interesting concept for a book. I enjoyed it. Art meets the written word. Tom Phillips is like a sculptor, finding a new way to make art, removing many of the words from a randomly chosen novel and making a new story from it, with art folded in as well. It doesn't yield a perfectly readable story, but was very well done, and at times it reads like poetry.

William says

A treated Victorian novel, an exercise in artistry and perhaps the most captivating work of art I've ever encountered.

MJ Nicholls says

An abstract, luxurious visual feast, an enduring marriage of text and art.

Gina says

This is a great book if you are into collage art and want some inspiration.

Beth Wisniewski says

Absolutely LOVED this book! It was beautifully illustrated and the poems were unique, funny, and sometimes sad. As usual, Allie, you've recommended a book I loved! Thanks!! :)

Ellie says

I loved this book so much that upon finishing it, I immediately bought a copy. This is not a book to read only in a linear way (although that certainly works, following a story about a fictional character named Bill Toge) but also to dip into continually.

Is it primarily an art book or poetry? Who cares? Each page is lovely to look at and often equally lovely to read. Humument is an example of erasure or found poetry. Phillips took an old, not intrinsically interesting, Victorian novel. He then painted over each page or made a collage upon it, leaving some words legible that create a poem that one would never imagine was contained within the page.

Phillips has worked on this novel? poem? art piece? for 50 years. In 2017, the final version of the work will be published. It has been used as the basis of an opera (in 1969), a digital app, exhibitions, and several published versions. The book seems inexhaustible in its possibilities both for other art/poetry works and reading pleasure.

I discovered erasure poetry this year and have found tremendous pleasure in it (a few examples of volumes I have loved include Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow*, *Nets* by Jen Bervin, and *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip). I have also read interviews with the creators of these works (and others) and find it interesting intellectually as well as satisfying artistically).

Humument is fun as well as beautiful. I look forward to spending more time with this work, both following the "adventures" of the character Toge and just looking over the individual pages, enjoying both their look and their content.

Eddie Watkins says

This really is a beautiful work of art and endless mind/eye stimulator and I finally have my own copy.

Sam says

When I first stumbled across this in the library I was horrified at the thought of doing such things to a book (yes I am that much of a geek, it's okay I'm fine with this) but then I took a moment to read the story behind how and why Phillips did so and I must say I am a convert (and pleased that he has kept the original unscathed!). He has managed to breathe new life into an old work that would otherwise have been left forgotten on dusty shelves and in doing so has opened up a whole new genre of reading and style of art, all in one hit. Each page is superbly done and while the reading of this work is a little abstract, patterns quickly emerge and engross the reader/viewer in the overall beauty of the work. This is simply something you must try for yourself.

Andreea says

I was reluctant when I first heard about this book, but read it anyway at my teacher's recommendation. It was a really nice surprise and I can see why some people say it's the book that comes closest to a work of art. It reads like a blank verse poem. Some of the associations of words and ideas were so unexpected and beautiful, I ended up smiling like an idiot on my journey home. And it seems this is a work in progress, as the author keeps adding other pages with every new edition published.

Paul Bryant says

[image error]

Forrest says

This is possibly the most beautiful book I own. It may also be one of the most beautiful pieces of art I own. Oh, and, in a strange way, it's a sculpture, as well. I strongly doubt, however, that you will hear an audiobook version of this work. It just doesn't lend itself to auditory appreciation (unless one likes the sound of pages flipping, which is, I must admit, one of the more pleasing sounds to my ears). And describing the work doesn't do it justice at all. This is an artifact that one must see and handle for one's self. I won't demean the beauty of this work by trying to explain the mechanics of its creation. That story is well-documented and, yes, intriguing. But reading *A Humument* is more about the *experience* of interfacing with Phillips' incredible creation (or reincarnation?) than about appreciating the history of the book's construction. And it is not really about the "plot," if you can even say it has a plot. "Reading" is not even an accurate term to describe one's interfacing with this work. "Breathing" might be more appropriate, or "meditating" or "absorbing" or even "melding with". As I think about it, I like the last description best: one *melds* with *A Humument*. I wish I could adequately relate the grandeur of this work, the monumental *TREASURE* that it is. Alas, all I can do is to hope to allure you into finding a copy for yourself so that you can meld with it, as I have. Sorry, everyone, but you're on your own this time. You and the book. Just the two of you. I can't help you. Besides, I'm a bit busy melding with this treasure myself.

Chris says

Does one really read this? Well, certainly not the way one reads anything else. Tom Phillips has built his life's work around W. H. Mallock's discardable Victorian novel *A Human Document*. Phillips has created and recreated his *Humument* (mine's the 4th edition--each different) using Mallock's text as his canvass. He draws, sketches, and paints over the pages of the text, creating his own text through excision. Phillips' words then are only those words or parts of words in Mallock's text he chooses to leave untouched. The resulting text works as a series of abstract reflections--the text illuminating the image and the image illuminating the text. It functions unlike any other text I know, and Phillips dances brilliantly in his bizarre, self-imposed constraints. You can see pages here. He also translated Dante's *Inferno* and interspersed the text with treated pages of Mallock's text that offer commentary on Dante's work. Suffice it to say, I think that's pretty f'n cool.

mwpm says

Like most projects that end up lasting half a lifetime, this started out as idle play at the fringe of my work and preoccupations. I had read an interview with William S. Burroughs (Paris Review, 1965) and, as a result, had played with the 'cut up' technique, making my own variant (the columnedge poem) from current copies of the *New Statesman*. It seemed a good idea to push these devices into more ambitious service.

I made a rule; that the first (coherent) book I could find for threepence (i.e. 1¼p) would serve.

Autin's the furniture repository stands on Peckham Rye, where Blake saw his first angels and along which Van Gogh had probably walked on his way to Lewisham. At this propitious place, on a routine Saturday morning shopping expedition, I found, for exactly threepence, a copy of *A Human Document* by W. H. Mallock, published in 1892 as a popular reprint of a successful three-decker. It was already in its seventh thousand at the time of copy I acquired and cost originally three and sixpence. I had never heard of W. H. Mallock and it was fortunate for me that his stock had depreciated at the rate of a halfpenny a year to reach the required level. I have since amassed an almost complete collection of his works and have found out much

about him. He does not seem a very agreeable person: withdrawn and humourless (as photographs of him seem to confirm) he emerges from his work as a snob and a racist (there are some extremely distasteful anti-semitic passages in *A Human Document* itself). He has however been the subject of some praise from A. J. Ayer for his philosophical dialogue *The New Republic*, and *A Human Document* itself is flatteringly mentioned in a novel by Dorothy Richardson. However, for what were to become my purposes, his book is a feast. I have never come across its equal in later and more conscious searchings. Its vocabulary is rich and lush and its range of reference and allusion large. I have so far extracted from it over one thousand texts, and have yet to find a situation, statement, or thought which its words cannot be adapted to cover.[...]

- "Notes on *A Humument*" by the author

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Merrin says

Interesting book, this guy took a Victorian novel and painted on every page. He left some words visible on some pages, didn't leave any visible on other pages, and basically turned this completely forgettable novel into art. I love it.

Philip Carlsen says

It may have been twenty years ago that I bought my copy of Tom Phillips's A HUMUMENT. This postmodern objet d'art had been a decades-long project of his. Using as his source material the 1892 edition of the Victorian novel "A Human Document" by W.H. Mallock, Phillips scrupulously examined the text, page by page, for its hidden potential, then painted over most of the words, leaving a found text that relates fragments of the story of his found character, Bill Toge, whose name crops up whenever the word "together" offers itself for the obscuration of its last four letters.

Phillips is a brilliant, inventive graphic artist. The colors, textures, compositions, and concepts of his paintings vary wildly from one page to the next. For many years, I had periodically thumbed through A HUMUMENT primarily for the beauty of its art, jumping here and there, dipping in, taking pleasure in the seemingly random quality of the text, but never actually sitting down to "read" it all the way through. Now I have. How does it stand up as literature? Does it matter? I am reminded of John Cage's readings through "Finnegan's Wake." You simply take the ride and let all the sights wash over you.

On the first page of Mallock's original, in the proper order, Phillips was able to find the perfect words for announcing his project, in a tone of voice that evokes the grand baritone of Whitman: "The following sing I a book. a book of art of mind art and that which he hid I reveal." The next two pages take tentative steps into the story: "is The woman we are speaking of over her ankles in the storm and fire and desire of art; and the art of art and would have given us a humument or two / for photo dismay. / my pillow book, the puzzled sheets / my pocket-volume bound in reality." Bill Toge first appears on page 6: "... journal contents as yet is only one half of the toge story / the first scenes and feelings." A love story develops, one episode of which is revealed on page 189: "speech gave way / At last she felt toge / even night gave in."

Several passages read as poetic lists, such as page 187, consisting entirely, with one exception, of a series of two-word declarative sentences, provocative and touching: "words work / nature conditions / needs kill / women support / friends fit / nothing happens / successes close / experience knows / time walks / exercise kills / faculties function / star shuts / life stands alone." On page 279, Bill Toge sits down to a meal and all present are named: "twelve for breakfast: alf shrink and ron comptoir, stan gage, alf rosp, ted wink, clare somewhat and olive ribe, len welve, and eve sardine, al plish, val rant, Mrs. Mornspot, bill with his friends all about him."

Written descriptions do not do justice to the richness of this book. It has to be held in the hand, the pages turned, the colorful paintings reaching out directly to the eyes.
