Neo-Victorian Presence:
Tom Phillips and the Non-Hermeneutic Past

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If suspicion, as Lauren Goodlad and Andrew Sartori have recently proposed,[1] is on the wane in contemporary Victorian studies, its stock as a neo-Victorian fictional mode has arguably never been higher. While new formalist, book history, and digital humanities approaches to the nineteenth-century text have encroached upon if not overpowered new historicism and its trademarked interrogative mode over the last decade, neo-Victorian and steampunk fictions have arguably only became more paranoid, as the conspiracy-drenched and secret-haunted plots of Dan Simmons, Belinda Starling, Alan Moore, George Mann, Will Thomas, and Sarah Waters attest.[2] In the imaginative adaptations and appropriations of the nineteenth century that continue to form a sizeable part of the contemporary fiction market, one encounters repeatedly a vision of the Victorian era as a site of secrecy and covert, even occulted, power whose workings require expert hermeneutic excavation, often performed at considerable peril to the daring interpreter. Such narratives provide a fascinating instance of the affective lure, micro-political stakes, and enduring appeal of a popularised "suspicious" (Felski "Suspicious Minds") or "symptomatic" (Best and Marcus) reading of the nineteenth-century past and its canonical texts. Yet the prominence of suspicion and political revisionism in the contemporary neo-Victorian scene has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring a less acknowledged and non-hermeneutic tradition of neo-Victorian writing, one that this article aims to uncover through a discussion of what is arguably its most remarkable example: Tom Phillips's stunning and constantly evolving artist's book *A Humument*.[3]

Initiated in 1966 as part of an OULIPO-esque[4] constrained writing experiment and still in process over four decades later, *A Humument* belongs to an alternate vein of neo-Victorianism which deploys extravagant formal strategies to thwart the hermeneutic suspicion it occasionally courts, moving beyond the narrative estrangement strategies associated with historiographic metafiction to disrupt the physical as well as intellectual processes requisite to literary interpretation. This interruptive effect owes much to the book's unique mode of composition and revision. In his much-recounted story of the project's inception, the artist describes how one Saturday morning in 1966 he set out to find a used book that would serve as the basis for a Burroughs-inspired cut-up experiment. His selection criteria centred not on content but on price: "I made a rule: that the first (coherent) book that I could find for threepence (i.e. 1 ¼ p) would serve" (Phillips, "A Treated Victorian Novel" 181). Apparently by chance, this happened to be W. H. Mallock's now little-read but contemporarily successful triple-decker *A Human Document* (1892), from which, as Mary Ann Caws observes, he formed his own title by act of crasis (22). Phillips then set to work by blocking out sections of text to form new sentences and words, painting, sketching, and building collages over the now repurposed print space to create a series of sometimes complementary, sometimes disconnected text/image relationships. Ten pages of *A Humument* were published for limited circulation in 1970, with the first complete private edition appearing in 1973 and then being reissued in a larger trade run by Thames and Hudson in 1980; subsequent versions appeared in 1987, 1997, 2005 and 2012. In its various versions, and indeed in Phillips's commitment to metamorphosis rather than singular interpretation, *A Humument* deftly bridges depth and surface models of apprehending Victorian texts to offer a fascinating example of collaboration, rather than imitation, parody, or revisionist correction, between nineteenth and twenty-first century writers.

The Suspicions of neo-Victorianism
The relationship between the neo-Victorian imagination and hermeneutic suspicion has seemed so close to some critics as to prove virtually definitive, as it does in Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's path-breaking 2010 monograph, *Neo-Victorianism*:[5]

> What we argue throughout this book is the 'neo-Victorian' is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss…texts (literary, filmic, audio-visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*. (4)

By no means unique to Heilmann and Llewellyn, this emphasis on self-conscious revisionism has proved central to the sub-discipline's emergent identity. Thus Cora Kaplan, writing in *Victoriana* (2007), associates her titular category not with texts that adopt an (implicitly *mere*) Victorian surface or patina, but those perform a "self-conscious re-writing of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understanding of the historical itself" (5). Neo-Victorianism, in this tradition of interpretation, lifts the veil, it exposes the (always still) hidden "restrictive, disciplinary, and discriminatory nature of Victorian ways of representing the world" (Munford and Young 4) in order to produce pre-calculated political, aesthetic and ethical effects. But corrective revisionism, however worthy its intentions, can have its limitations as an interpretive stance. In a delightfully polemic recent critique of what she terms "suspicious reading", Rita Felski notes that the problem with any enduring stance of iconoclasm is, not only that it might miss or blunt the complexity of its original, but also that it might become just as stultified and predictable as the ideology it apparently challenges ("Suspicious Minds" 217). Certainly, the most common subjects of popular neo-Victorianism's revelations and envoicements— fallen women, canonical Victorians with hidden, deviant natures, queer subversives—have not always, it seems fair to say, been particularly distinguished by their variety. To say this is not to trivialise the reality and sufferings of the historical precedents of these fictional archetypes, nor to call for a moratorium on their treatment in neo-Victorian fiction. It is simply to point out that certain oft-rehearsed modes of historiographic interrogation or exposure may no longer have the political effects or aesthetic freshness once associated with them, may endure, not because of their radical force, but by virtue of their titillating appeal to an audience honed on the pleasures of confession.[6]

Concerns about the value, originality, or sincerity of depth reading and its accompanying suspicion have formed a crucial impetus for the numerous challenges to new historicism posed over the fifteen years by the likes of Felski, Franco Moretti, Bruno Latour, Hans Gumbrecht, and others. They target what Felski, following Paul Ricoeur, terms the "hermeneutics of suspicion", "a distinctively modern style of interpretation that is driven be a desire to demystify, an adamant refusal to take words at face value . . . [and a] conviction, that manifest content shrouds darker, more unpalatable truths" (Felski "Suspicious Minds" 216). Felski and others have challenged this desire for demystification, not because they seek a naïve, escapist, or non-questioning approach to literature— indeed, their own critiques typically deploy the same rigorous ideological suspicion they indict— but rather because they feel it is no longer fit for purpose. Their objections coalesce loosely around four central claims: first, that suspicion as methodology, given its heavy reliance on close reading, is simply ill-equipped to handle the mass of print that lies beyond even the relatively-expanded

canons with which period-based scholars work (Moretti "The Slaughterhouse"); second, that its political claims ring increasingly hollow (Latour; Best and Marcus; Nealon); third, that it creates an unnecessarily oppositional relationship between interpreter and text; and fourth, that the approach has become so pervasive as to appear clichéd, no longer elucidating important differences between texts, but rather reducing them to competing versions of the same script of deviance and containment (Felski "After Suspicion"; "Suspicious Minds").

Although aimed at the hermeneutics of suspicion rather than neo-Victorian writing *per se*, each of these critiques has relevance for the latter mode, one whose frequent reliance on stock plots of buried secrets, hidden abuse or addiction, subversive envoicement, and encrypted messages only capable of decipherment by the equally rote figures of the outsider scholar-detective or deviant subcultural insider have become so well known as to invite regular parody.[7] As such, they deserve greater elaboration here. The first line of argument is associated with Franco Moretti, whose controversial mapping and graphing approach to the nineteenth-century novel, a practice he refers to as "distant reading", attempts to redress the problem of scale in contemporary Victorian studies. He observes, "what a minimal fraction of the literary field we all work on; a canon of two hundred novels, for instance, sounds very large for nineteenth-century Britain . . . but it is still less than one per cent of the novels that were actually published. . . a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases (Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* 4). If we want to form large-scale hypotheses about the Victorian novel, he argues, we simply cannot afford to keep performing microcosmic close readings of the same ten or twenty or fifty novels and making them stand for the whole. The goals of neo-Victorian fiction—if, indeed, we can see these as extractable— are of course different from those of Victorian studies, yet one might nonetheless make a similar argument about the creatively impoverishing effects of over-recruiting the same stock characters and social scenarios for exposure and/or liberation.

While Moretti views suspicious close reading as limited in its abstractive range, others are similarly unconvinced of its progressive political potential, taking particular issue with its reputation as a radically interventionist mode necessarily superior to what Bruno Latour terms "naïve belief" (237). In a provocative 2004 rejoinder to the suspicious hermeneutic mode long buttressed by his own science studies discipline, Latour argues that suspicion has now been assimilated by the very conservative cultural forces whose assumptions it was initially intended to challenge, a fact nowhere more evident than in the proliferation of right-wing conspiracy theories.[8] Far from having a reliably transgressive effect, suspicion as an interpretative mode is for Latour flexible and ubiquitous enough to be politically banal, ill-equipped, as Jeffrey Nealon has recently claimed, to deal with power structures that have no need of secrecy. After all, Nealon writes, "Contemporary capitalism, is not the sort of thing that hides— it's everywhere, at all times— so a depth-oriented hermeneutics of suspicion may not offer the most effective tool to diagnose it" (97). Neither Latour nor Nealon address neo-Victorianism directly, but the contemporary popularity of the mode's exposure plot, with its routine unmasking of historical sexual hypocrisy, racial oppression, and class exploitation, might well furnish literary evidence of the same absorption and diffusion processes they describe. To some audiences, ideological suspicion might simply confirm what they always already knew about the Victorian era via popular mediation: that its surfaces are engineered to deceive, that its power structures flowed up from chthonic depths as well as down from centralised authority, and that the excavation of these structures might itself be seen as a form of radical intervention.

A final alleged effect of the hermeneutics of suspicion that has implications for neo-Victorianism deserves our attention here. This is its encouragement, for some critics, of a relationship based on subordination rather than equity between reader and text, or, for that matter, between the contemporary historical novel and the period it references. In both cases, one partner in the dyad is transformed into a reluctant witness who only divulges its truths and breaks its polite silences only through coercion. Innately iconoclastic, this interrogative mode takes almost nothing for granted, and recognises most moments of seeming textual transparency and clarity as elaborate subterfuge. Indeed, it only leaves one ideological assumption unchallenged— the stalwart belief that there is always a secret to be revealed in every textual or aesthetic construction. Rita Felski asks, "Why do so many scholars feel impelled to unmask and demystify the works they read? What sustains their certainty that a text is withholding some vital information, that they must authorize their commentary by highlighting what is concealed, repressed, unsaid?" (218).[9] The project of demystification, she warns, can just as easily produce as demolish hierarchies, elevating the critic to the status of scholar-magus as it relegates the text to the status of intricate but always inevitably penetrable cipher.

One alternative to the potentially exploitive or politically vacuous neo-Victorian suspicion plot lies in what we might, following Hans Gumbrecht, deem its "non-hermeneutic" counterpart, a category comprising works that refuse to privilege hermeneutic interrogation even if they do not wholly reject it. Their impact derives not from their hidden significations, but rather their so-called "presence", described by Gumbrecht in his 2004 capstone monograph *Production of Presence* as their "tangibil[ity] for human hands . . . [and] immediate impact on human bodies" (xviii). These presence effects relate, not to what a text *means*, but to how it feels, looks, smells (and possibly tastes or sounds) as our bodies interface with it, to the ways in which our eyes and or/hands are invited to move over the narrative's material form or platform. A presence-based approach to literature refuses to devalue these forms of interaction at the expense of the text's hermeneutic value as bearer of meaning; instead it acts as a corrective "against the tendency in contemporary culture to abandon and even forget the possibility of a presence-based relationship to the world" (Gumbrecht xiv-xv). While I am less convinced of the extent of presence's neglect in contemporary culture than Gumbrecht, and indeed of the possibility that presence can ever entirely stand apart from interpretation, his terminology seems to me strategically useful in this instance. The form of neo-Victorian representation I am about to discuss substitutes the presence of Victorian textual matter for suspicion, in some cases literally inviting the reader to touch and sense the raw stuff of which nineteenth-century novels were made. Its embrace of Victorian surfaces and textures in no way qualifies it as less challenging or more trivial than its suspicious counterparts; on the contrary, these encounters have the potential to be as if not more destabilising and inventive than a plunge into the hidden depths of an all too familiar set of silences and repressions.

Neo-Victorian Presence: Tom Phillips's *A Humument*
Tom Phillip's *A Humument* is one among several examples a non-hermeneutic neo-Victorianism that, while capable of being subjected to a suspicious reading— no text, after all, wholly pre-determines its own reception— is not, I contend, best understood by one. Others include non-referential forms of contemporary steampunk performance,[10] Max Ernst's surrealist collage experiment with Victorian print culture in *Une semaine de bonté* (1934; Figure 1), and the Beats-influenced typographical experiments of psychogeographer Iain Sinclair, as evidenced most dramatically in his 1987 novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*

(Figure 2). What all these examples share is a fascination with the presence effects of Victorian style and material cultures over their potential hermeneutic significance or value: non-referential steampunks incorporate Victorian materials (brass, leather, glass) and styles into their retrofitted aesthetic, while generally rejecting period authenticity; Ernst's collage-novel constitutes itself from nineteenth-century popular magazine images combined in a surreal and non-sequential fashion to undermine the at least partial coherence and legibility on which interpretation relies; and Sinclair quite literally cuts into and redacts the words of a famous late Victorian popular novel— Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1888)— to create a new text which supports his hallucinating narrator's theory on the identity of Jack the Ripper. Whatever these disparate texts and styles may be doing with the Victorian referents they invoke, they are neither restoring them to an original context nor revealing their relationship to a historical or contemporary system of meaning that lies through and beyond, but not on, their material surfaces.[11] They seem predicated more on arbitrariness and improvisation than on invested ideological critiques of Victorian political and social legacies, even as they take the nineteenth century as a catalyst. This form of presence—rather than meaning-based encounter with the Victorian—is nowhere better epitomised than in the artist's book I take as my chief example, Tom Phillips's *A Humument* (Figure 3).

Although the Victorian referent is sufficiently important to *A Humument* to warrant a place in its subtitle ("A Treated *Victorian* Novel"), it seems, as Phillips's account of the project's origins makes clear, only by chance that the book was based on a nineteenth-century novel at all. *A Humument*'s fascinatingly random provenance suggests little of the self-conscious revisionist volition often attributed to neo-Victorian writing, even if its plot seemingly reproduces—albeit, as I will argue later, in a deliberately depthless and ahistorical way— the latter's well-documented fixation with sexual revelation and exposure. It should thus come as no surprise that the artist's book has never yet been examined in the critical context of neo-Victorianism. Another likely reason for this omission lies in its affiliation via genre with neo-Victorianism's tacitly unspoken "Other", namely, modernism.[12] *A Humument* is frequently, although not uncontroversially, classified as an artist's book,[13] an innovative twentieth-century hybrid form that borrows or deconstructs the codex form, often combing text with other, non-verbal art forms. Although linked to earlier precedents, most notably the illustrated books of William Blake and William Morris, the artist's book has routinely been positioned by its critics as an almost exclusively twentieth-century art form, or even, in Joanna Drucker's view, *the* twentieth-century art form *sine qua non* (1), one that took seed in the *livres d'artistes* of Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Marc Chagall, and found flower in the sixties-era work of Dieter Roth, Ed Ruscha, and others.[14] The much-noted twentieth-century *avant-garde* roots of the artist's book as form, along with Phillip's foregrounding of key modernist epigraphs that he extracts from Mallock's prose— E.M. Forster's "Only Connect" (Phillips, *A Humument* [2005] 7, 185) and Ezra Pound's "Make it New" (Phillips, *A Humument* [2005] 158; Figures 4 and 5)— place *A Humument* well beyond the mainstream of sensational, neo-realist, and even historiographically metafictional styles of popular neo-Victorianism. Perhaps as a result of this positioning, some of *A Humument*'s admirers have embraced another characteristic feature of the modernist project:[15] namely, a pronounced anti-Victorianism. Consider, for example, William Gass's appraisal of the relationship between Phillips's creation and its nineteenth-century source. Mallock's *A Human Document*, he writes, can be detected under Phillips's innovative sutures as a form of laughable obsolescence composed of "staid Victorian pages," each "telling its own dated tale of Victorian times", while building "a story that has now disappeared from every mind" (Gass 80). This is a distinctly unfair representation of an 1890s narrative that not only explores the potential nobility of adulterous love but also, as other critics have pointed out,

itself adopts a self-conscious meta-textual style that anticipates the techniques of literary post-modernism.[16] Gass's over-estimation of the absolute difference, even antagonism, between the two works certainly has not encouraged the association of *A Humument* with neo-Victorianism.

Yet Phillips's own account of the project suggests a much closer, and certainly more genial, affinity between Mallock's novel and his ever-mutating "treatment" of it than his contemporising interpreters have sometimes been willing to credit, one that offers an intriguing corrective to the paradigms of suspicion, exposure, and remediation that pervade assessments of neo-Victorian appropriation. *A Humument*, he writes in his 1988 introduction to the work, is best understood as "curious unwitting collaboration between two ill-suited people seventy-five years apart" (Phillips, "A Treated Victorian Novel"186). This description, obviously true for Mallock who, dead some forty years before the inception of *A Humument,* could hardly be named as a willing accomplice, also hints at an equivalent initial unconsciousness of the scope of the collaboration on the part of the living artist. What may have began, or remained, as a straightforward exercise in iconoclasm and palimpsestic erasure morphed instead into something much more mutual, an equal dialogue between the living and the dead.[17] We see this sense of reciprocality in the respect with which Phillips routinely treats Mallock despite the considerable political differences between the two men. Admittedly, he writes, Mallock "does not seem a very agreeable person . . . he emerges from his work as a snob and a racist . . . However, for what were to become my purposes, his book is a feast" (Phillips, "A Treated Victorian Novel"181). Attributions of moral failings and reactionary sensibilities to Victorian authors are by no means uncommon within the spectrum of neo-Victorian bio-fiction,[18] and the first part of this statement might seem like a particularly naïve iteration of biographical fallacy. But this vision of the book as repository for the limited and reactionary identity of its author is then quickly replaced, or written over, with a more rhizomatic vision of the text as "feast" of limitless creative plenitude. Beyond this fleeting introductory remark, no further allusion to Mallock's putative personal characteristics or political convictions are made; the body of *A Humument* significantly, and even flamboyantly, refuses to pursue a coherent depth critique of either *A Human Document*'s author or his ideological milieu. Instead, it performs a sustained subversion of both the methodology, critical assumptions, and the physical processes of close reading, thwarting even the familiar left-to-right movement of the Western reader's eye across the printed page.

To recognise *A Humument*'s defiance of conventional interpretation practices in favour a more spontaneous and libidinal encounter with Victorian print matter is not to dismiss it as a sort of anarchistic exercise in formlessness. Indeed, the work has a rough genre affiliation— Phillips places it in the Progress of Love tradition epitomised in the *Hypnerotomachia Polophili* (1499) ("A Treated Victorian Novel"182)— and story structure, although to describe these as providing a coherent and suspense-driven plot, as does Mary Ann Caws, might be going too far.[19] Its pages allude to the alternately ecstatic and tortured affair between protagonist Bill Toge (his name cut out of "together") and his lover Irma, in scenes intercut with gnomic utterances and romantic effusions on art, money, sex, nature, and the *anomie* of urban life. Despite his retention of the 1892 edition's original consecutive page numbers, Phillips shows little interest in creating or sustaining the suspense associated with rising and sequentially ordered action. Such a goal would, after all, compromise *A Humument*'s challenge to the logic and spatio-temporal experience of Western reading practices, sketched pithily in the ballooned text which appears on page 7 of the 2005 edition:

scribe the once or twice story
scribe the art of the other hand
you have written a volume inside out
a thrown Journal
the thick drama of dead progress
and so the changes made the book continue
now the arts connect. (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] 7; Figure 6)

Rather than using the Victorian original as a basis for interpretation or critique, this page's cut-up prose poem positions it as an ephemeral stage in a process of Lamarckist aesthetic adaptation, one in which change guarantees survival. Phillips's alterations don't expose *A Human Document*'s always-present, always-hidden, libidinal energies; instead, they upgrade the novel with the transitory variations it requires to escape what Franco Moretti has memorably termed "the slaughterhouse of literature", that oblivion to which most of the world's books will eventually be consigned ("The Slaughterhouse of Literature" 207). Acknowledging that the newly-treated text may prove no more durable than the typography it replaces, *A Humument* commits itself to an inexorable process of metamorphosis and variation. Thus the potentially definitive if admittedly cryptic statement of method examined above is revised in the 2012 edition of the work, altered slightly to hint at a tactic of exposure absent in the previous version:

scribe
scribe the once or twice story
the story reveal
a sister story
a veil thrown over as veil, as
see now the arts connect
changes made the book continue. (Phillips, *A Humument* [2012] 7; Figure 7)

If Phillips's ongoing textual treatments occasionally harmonise with and illuminate the themes of thwarted love and disenchantment that suffuse Mallock's original, good and well, but this consilience hardly seems primary to a work more interested in transformation for its own sake rather than for the purposes of stable translation.

A Humument's metamorphic character manifests not only in its continual revision of Mallock's pages, but also, as noted earlier, in its challenge to the conventional techniques and directionality of Western reading habits. So far, I have been reading the visible text on Phillips's treated pages from left to right and top to bottom, as witnessed in the above account of the 2005 and 2012 versions of *A Humument*'s page seven. But, of course, my mode of proceeding has been slightly disingenuous; nothing in the placement of Phillips's erratically scattered text bubbles or "rivers", as he refers to them, requires or invites us to follow this familiar and authorised route. Every page arranges and places the text fragments differently, estranging us from the codex page's expected topography. The reader might thus, after finishing reading a page's words in the usual direction, pause before turning to the next and then re-read the textual fragments in a different order to produce an altered meaning. Of course, it is possible to read any text in this way— audiences are never compelled to obey formal cues, and there's no reason why a reader couldn't proceed, for example, through Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) from back to front or right to left should they so desire. But it would be disingenuous to suggest that such an approach is just as likely, or indeed, just as strongly formally encouraged, in the neo-sensation example as in that of the artist's book. Denied a coherent or consistent pattern of textual placement across the work, we encounter

each page as a new navigational situation. As such, the encounter with any one of *A Humument*'s pages can take significantly more or less time than one with its text-dense Victorian source.

This play with the temporality of reading finds resonance in Phillips's simultaneous experiment with the history of graphic style, one that further disrupts the semantic coherence on which close reading relies. For in its visual framing, the artist's book is both preoccupied with and yet wholly irreverent towards historical referentiality. *A Humument* is, perhaps unsurprisingly, pervaded with graphic allusions to the Victorian period from which it takes its subtitle, incorporating such period styles and forms as the daguerreotype portrait (Phillips, *A Humument* [2005] 27; Figure 8), wood engravings and etchings (202; Figure 9), advertising typeface (42; Figure 10), arts and crafts wall paper (back page; Figure 11), and even that most controversial of Victorian substances: ectoplasm (3; Figure 12). These stylistic signposts might seem to encourage a reading of *A Humument* as a historicist meditation on the aesthetics and culture of Mallock's *fin-de-siècle* milieu. But they are simultaneously interfused by a vertiginous range of competing styles from vastly diverse eras and cultural registers, such as that of mid-twentieth century pop art and cartoons (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] 246; Figure 13), impressionistic pointillism (230; Figure 14), non-figurative Islamic art (243; Figure 15), Cubist collage (207; Figure 16), and the iconography of the CND movement (141; Figure 17), to name just a few. Under the aegis of this treated *Victorian* text, the reader is moved backward and forward through a history of popular, decorative, and fine art surfaces, encountering a host of visual motifs associated with periods prior to, after, and simultaneous with the 1890sdecade of *A Human Document*'s first publication. Rather, then, than reinterpreting a defined nineteenth-century context from the vantage of its own contemporary production period— thus performing a dialogue between two fixed and identifiable points— *A Humument* creates an aesthetic space of total historical synchronicity, in which forms and images elude their specific cultural milieus to meet and fuse with each other. It seems a fitting tribute to this dislocation that the work should open with this delightfully counter-intuitive author's preface: "Hoping that the reader would want to meet the book head on I have put the introduction at the end" (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] n.p.).[20]

Although *A Humument* deliberately refuses a sustained hermeneutic engagement with the period and narrative of its historical source text, some of its readers might insist that elements of the same neo-Victorian suspicion my essay earlier addressed are nonetheless latent within its pages. These are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the frequent sexual puns, innuendoes, and visual motifs that pervade the book, ones which arguably participate in what Marie-Luise Kohlke identifies as the "prurient penchant for revelling in indecency" so characteristic of popular neo-Victorianism (5). Phillips demonstrates an almost schoolboyish glee in pulling visual *double entendres* out of Mallock's text. Consider, for example, page 16 of the 2005 text, which features the abstract naked figures of a man and woman facing each other, positioned above a separate green panel adorned with a crudely painted set of male genitals captioned by "Toge roused". "Fancy him darling?", the text bubbles ask, and then continue: "coming to his hand, went on, to enter, luding, within his tongue, comes again" (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] 16; Figure 18). A few pages later, we are confronted with a swollen vaginal form in which the words "the great Fanny" appear (19; Figure 19); the shape is then repeated near the end of the work when Toge's pining thoughts for Irma— "longing for this longing love alone" (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] 360; Figure 20)— are superimposed upon the *mons veneris* of an abstracted female torso. Genital imagery and sexual innuendoes such as these are rife enough within *A Humument* to constitute a type of keynote, manifesting across a variety of differently-styled pages.[21] What are we to make of

this preoccupation? Might the recurrent sexual motifs provide a, or perhaps even *the*, historicist and psychoanalytic coherence to a work that otherwise appears to be an improvised assemblage? In its quite literal peeling away and enhancement of a Victorian surface to reveal its hitherto unseen erotic potential, some might argue that *A Humument* merely reifies the Foucauldian repressive hypothesis through style.

There are (at least) two compelling reasons to avoid assessing *A Humument* as yet another version of the ongoing assault on Victorian sexual repression that still persists undaunted in popular neo-Victorian fiction nearly four decades after its influential critique in the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976). First, because *A Humument*'s pointed rejection of a single-period aesthetic compromises our ability to read its erotic excesses as a rejoinder to Victorianism alone; second, because the highly aestheticised and ludic quality of the individual pages positions these motifs as more the product of creative construction rather than of hermeneutic translation. In other words, neither *A Humument*'s historical referent nor its methodology— superimposition and erasure rather than the excavation so commonly associated with neo-Victorian studies— seem stable enough to suggest this kind of consistent social critique.[22] The sexual motifs in *A Humument* are decoupled from what we might think of as depth or interiority; they target neither the characters in Mallock's original nor what one might want to term "the Victorian psyche", as such a depth model of historical subjectivity simply does not exist in the book. The book's erotic icons and allusions remain on the surface where they function, not as symptoms of hidden desire, but as hyperbolic flourishes.

Indeed, if *A Humument* champions any form of interpretation whatsoever, it is neither a historicist or a psychoanalytic, but rather a bibliomantic one, in which meaning is produced through the random opening of a book to reveal passages mysteriously and temporarily relevant to the viewer's circumstances. Phillips places this technique at the heart of his treatment of Mallock's novel, writing admiringly of *A Human Document*:

> 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 a thousand texts, and have yet to find a situation, statement of thought which its words cannot be adapted to cover. ("A Treated Victorian Novel"181)

Thus, in advance of a professional trip to South Africa in 1974 when the country's apartheid government was still in full force, Phillips recalls "turn[ing] (as some might do to the *I Ching*) to *A Human Document*", and there finding the words, "wanted. A little white opening of thought" ("A Treated Victorian Novel"181). Like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) for Gabriel Betteredge in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), *A Human Document* is imagined by Phillips as a kind of universal primer for living, one that dispenses meaning through fleeting aside rather than direct relevance or explicitly-registered authorial intention. The product of a form of aesthetic divination itself, *A Humument* then becomes a vehicle for further acts of creative bibliomancy on the part of its readers, its thick, glossy pages and non-sequential images inviting readers to open its pages at random and in isolation from the whole. The book thus generates, not only different textual meanings, but also different material practices of reading, offering itself to us at once as a traditional codex, a series of arbitrarily arranged collages, and pre-cinematic flipbook whose pages might be turned rapidly to generate an abstract animation.

Given its preoccupation with all forms of generation, from the sexual to the material and the semantic, *A Humument* closes appropriately with a gesture of opening out towards the future,

both to that of the literary modernism germinating at the time of *A Human Document*'s publication, and to the afterlife that awaits Phillips's own postmodern creation. On Mallock's penultimate page, Phillips finds and cuts out across a mosaic-patterned background the closing refrain from that most famous of English-language modernist works, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922): "Oh, Ah, And I said—yes, I will yes" (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] 306; Figure 21), echoing Molly Bloom's libidinal incantation: "yes I said yes I will Yes" (Joyce 783). This modernist intertext is paired on the subsequent page by another, older one from the dedication to Shakespeare's sonnets, which Mallock's heroine Irma Schilizzi uses to head the confessional diary account of her love affair with Robert Grenville— "To the Sole and Only Begetter of this Volume" (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] 367). From this canonical epigraph flows a final text river which adds, "by whose side I shall lie, bone by bones, my best, perpetuate, equal page for page" (Phillips *A Humument* [2005] 267; Figure 22). Like Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 to which it alludes, this final cut-up prose poem offers a searing testament to a love destined to survive through the aeons via textual proliferation. It also reminds us of the methods of *A Humument*'s own production as a new mutation cut out from the verbal codes and graphic shapes of a remaindered Victorian text. In Phillips's magisterial artist's book, the Victorian novel is not interrogated, revised, or reinterpreted, but metamorphosised into a new species of image-text collaboration.

When read within the context of neo-Victorianism, *A Humument* reveals and denaturalises the implicit pose of suspicion long ascendant within contemporary fictional and scholarly encounters with the nineteenth-century past, allowing us to track other, by no means less ethically charged, modes of collaborative and presence-based contact between living and dead authors. Some, admittedly, might reject this positioning, arguing that the very absences I have here charted in Phillips's work— of sustained hermeneutic investment, historicist distrust, or of a pose of "writing back" to Mallock's original— ultimately disqualify it from consideration within a category whose very existence has so frequently been predicated on revision, critique, and exposure. One cannot but feel this would be a mistake, both in its perpetuation an overly-rigid and narrow definition of the nascent field, and its potential foreclosure of a fascinating debate about the appropriation, ideological use, and rejection of interpretation within neo-Victorianism's literary and visual works. *A Humument* uses a Victorian source text to create, not only an unique work of art, but also an atypical way of reading, one that refuses to entirely abandon historical markers and referents, but equally insists on an engagement with the past that is grounded primarily on the emotive presence of physical materials and aesthetic forms rather than on the suspicions of its reader. Indeed, the very incessancy of the work's production forces the reader out of the position of critical mastery that might seem requisite for hermeneutic translation; how, after all, can one interpret a text whose words and images are liable to change from year to year? Overtly non-hermeneutic texts by artists such as Phillips generate not just new meanings of and for the nineteenth century, but unconventional, hybridised forms of reading. In jarring and estranging its readers from the most rote suspicions of the era's textuality and sexuality, *A Humument* models innovative forms of critical, ethical, and aesthetic collaboration between the neo and the Victorian.

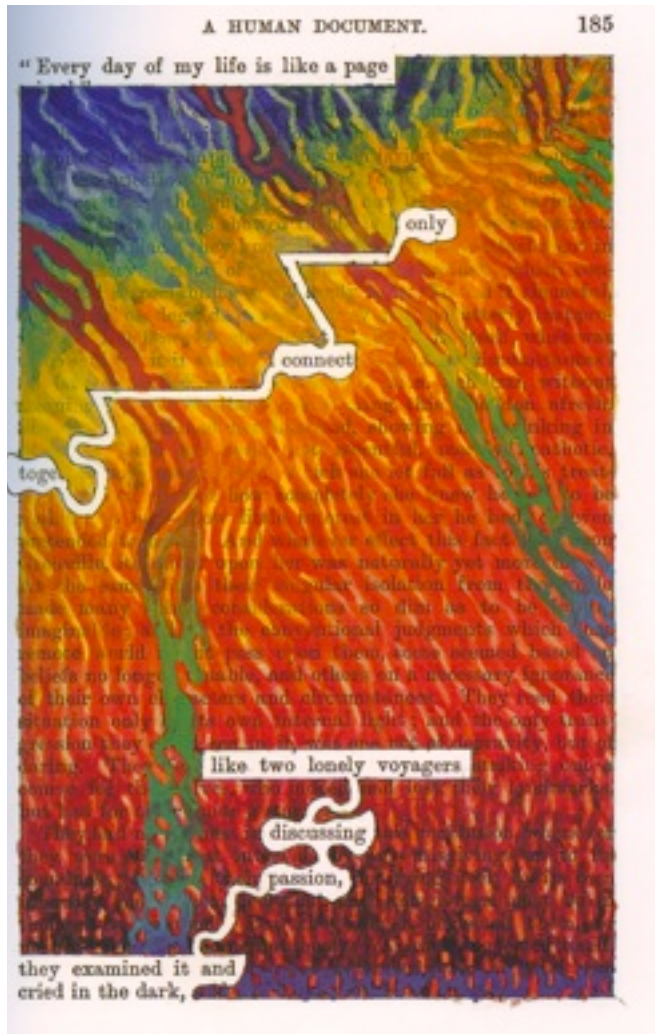Figure 1: Illustration from "Tuesday", Book Three of Ernst's *Une semaine de bonté*, 92

Figure 2: Redacted Page from Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* in Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, 59.

Figure 3: Title Page of W.H. Mallock's *A Human Document* (1892) and "Treated" Version in *A Humument* (2004)

Figure 4: "Only Connect", *A Humument*, 2004, 185.
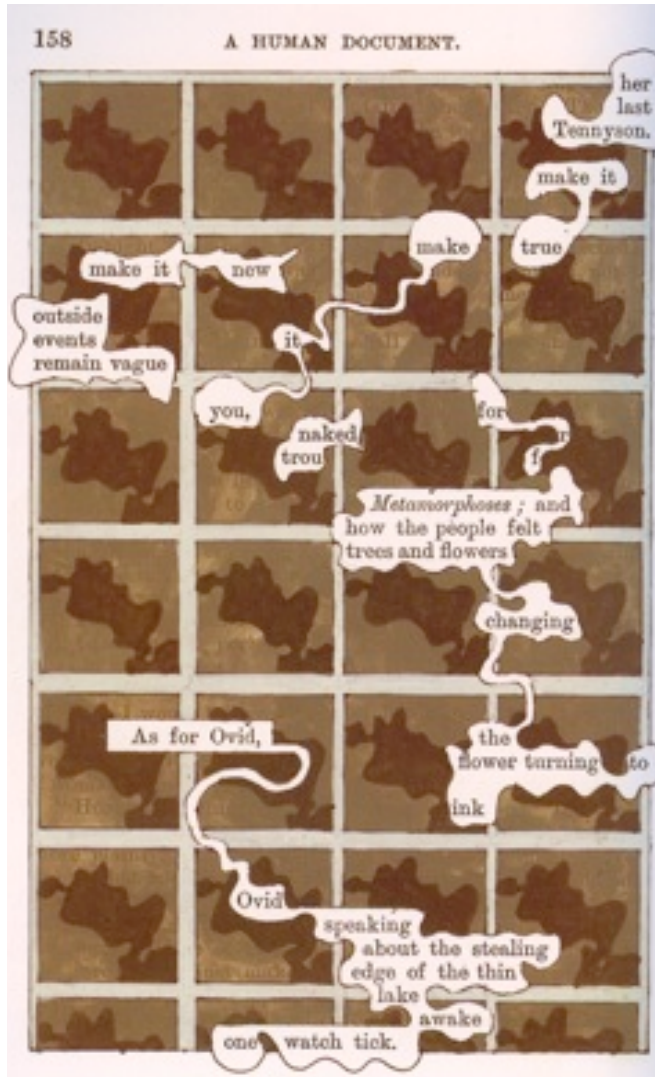
Figure 5: "Make It New", *A Humument*, 2004, 158.
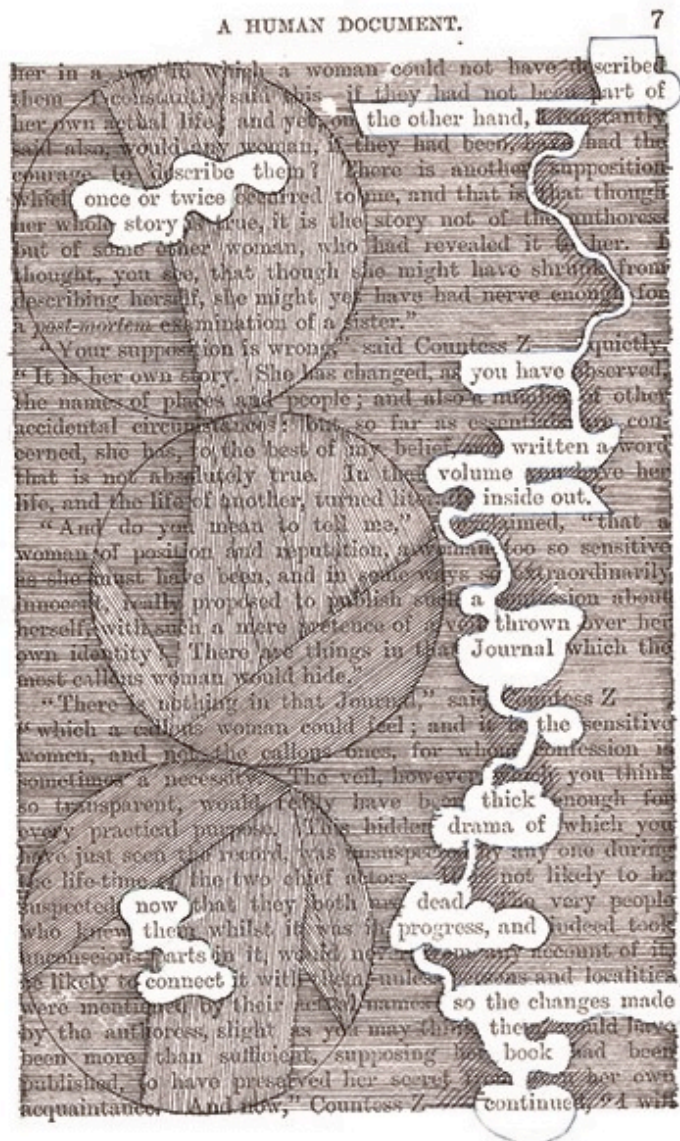
Figure 6: *A Humument*, 2004, 7.

Figure 7: The Re-Treated Version of Page 7 in the 2012 *A Humument*
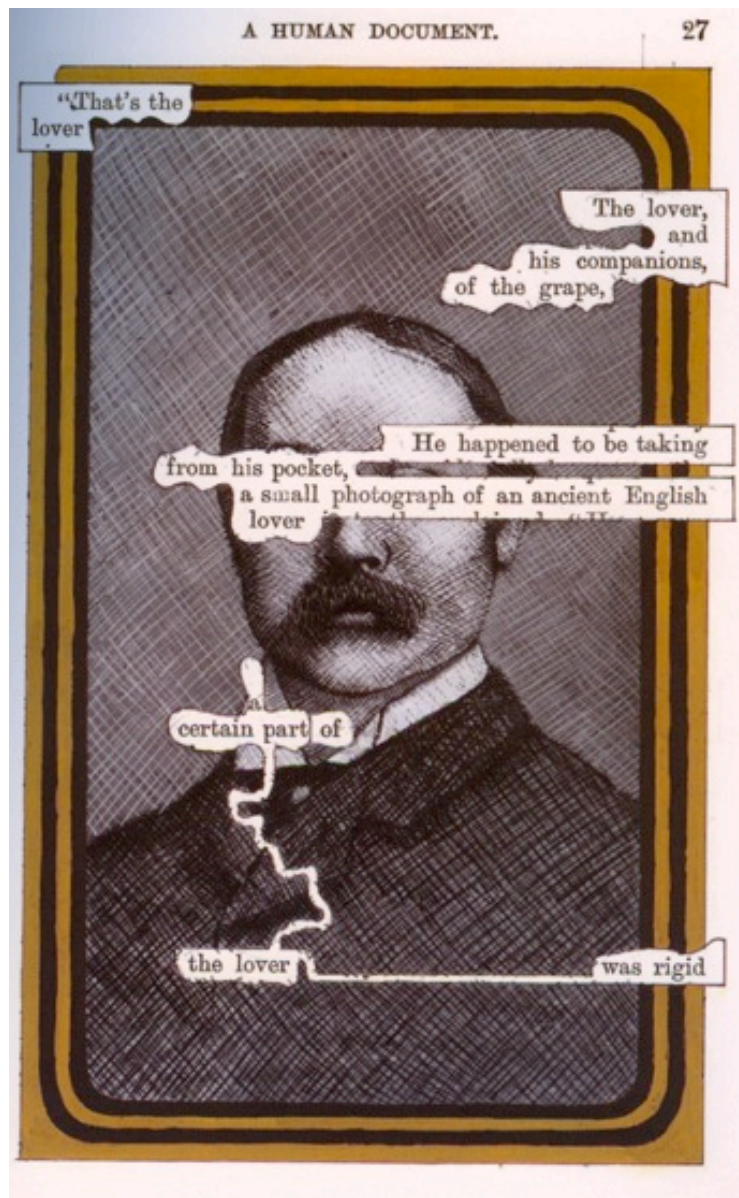
Figure 8: Daguerreotype Frame in *A Humument*, 2005, 27.

202   A HUMAN DOCUMENT.

At last

a letter.

night
acceptance,

and
a
prospect ; a
prospect

of

a pleasure to

merge
with
pleasure
after   pleasure

night
saw her hasten towards a man—a   corpulent man,

Figure 9: Nineteenth-Century Engraving Style (right panel) in *A Humument*, 2005, 202.
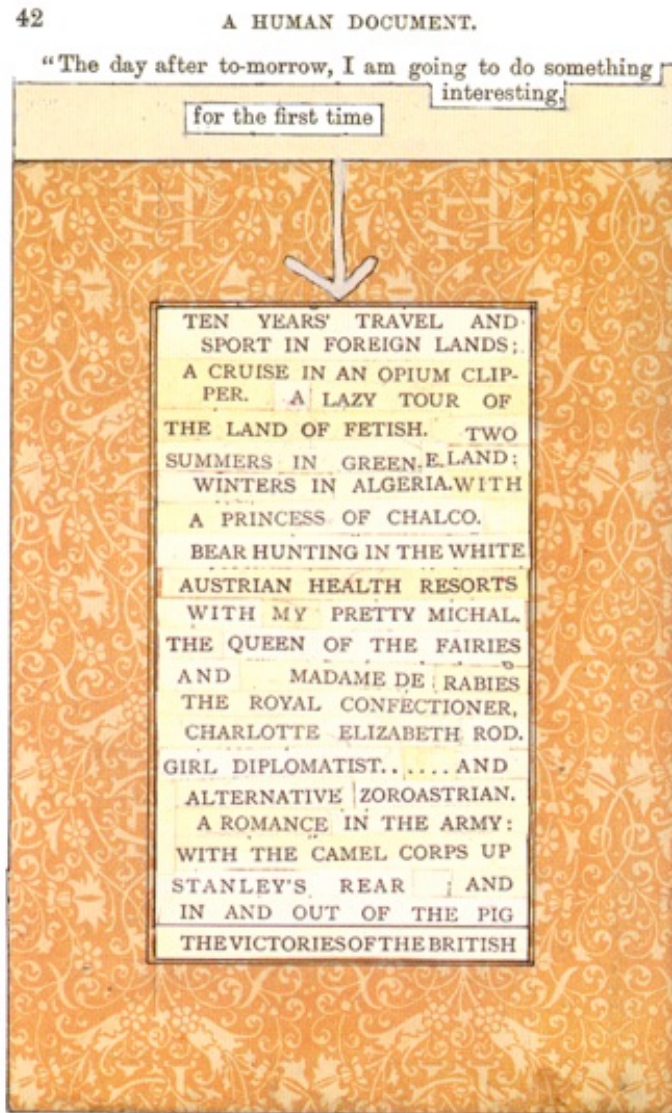
Figure 10: Victorian Book Advertising Typeface in *A Humument*, 2005, 42.
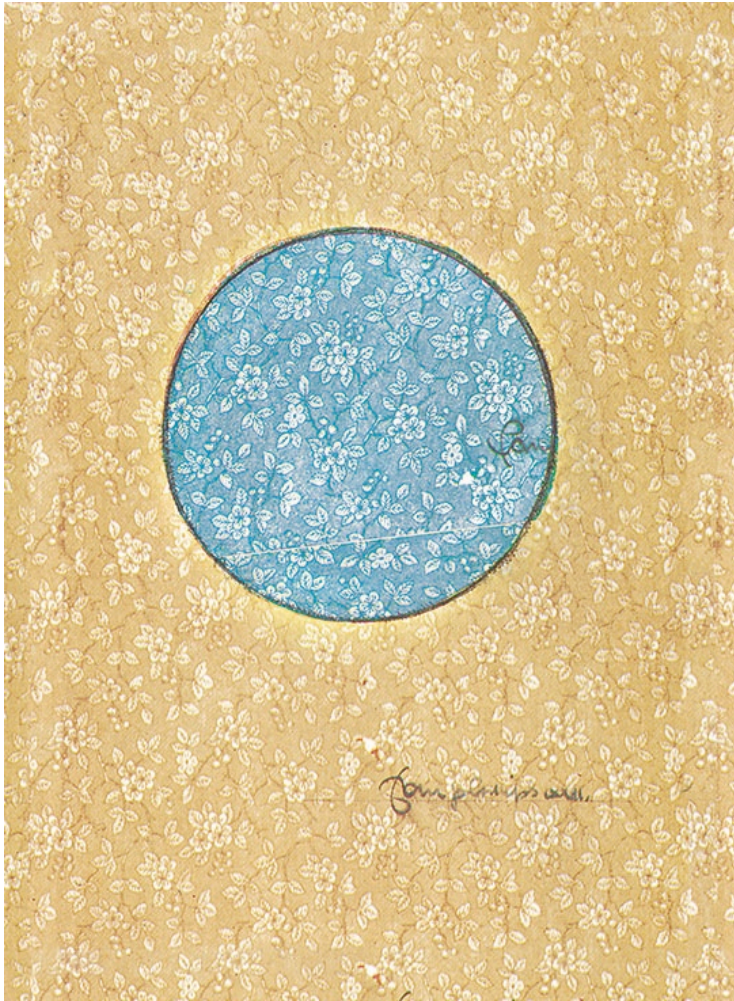
Figure 11: An Homage to Arts and Crafts Wallpaper in *A Humument,* with Author's Signature. Back cover.

Figure 12: Ectoplasm in *A Humument*, 2005, 3.

Figure 13: Comics form in *A Humument*, 2005, 246.

Figure 14: Pointillism in *A Humument*, 2005, 230.
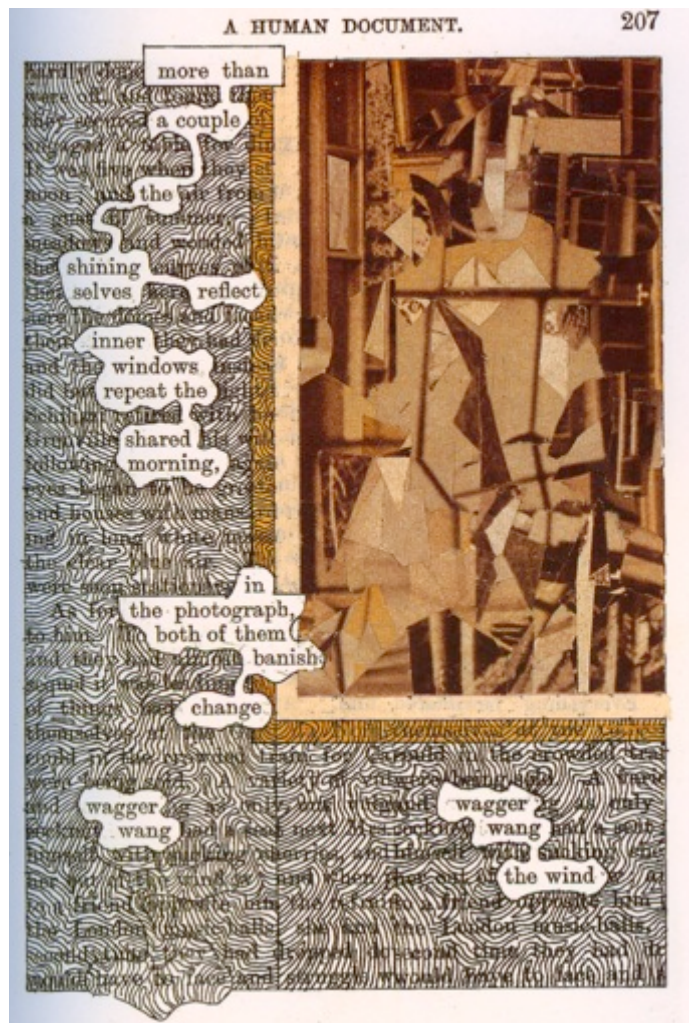
Figure 15: Islamic Art in *A Humument*, 2005, 243.

Figure 16: Cubist Collage in *A Humument,* 2005, 207.
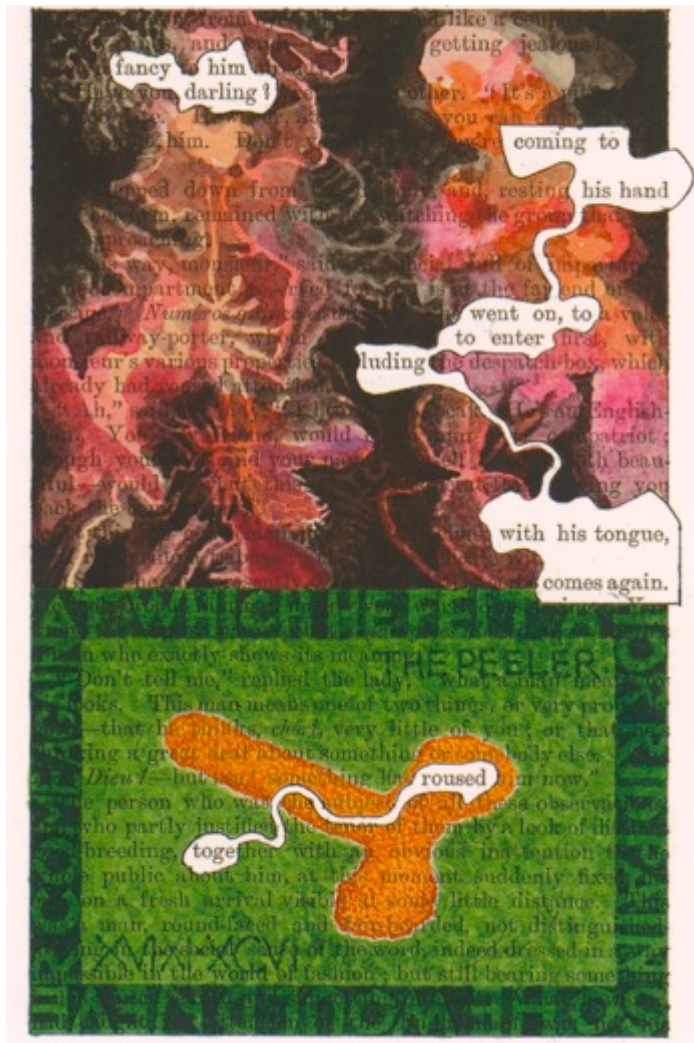
Figure 17: CND Imagery in *A Humument*, 2005, 141.

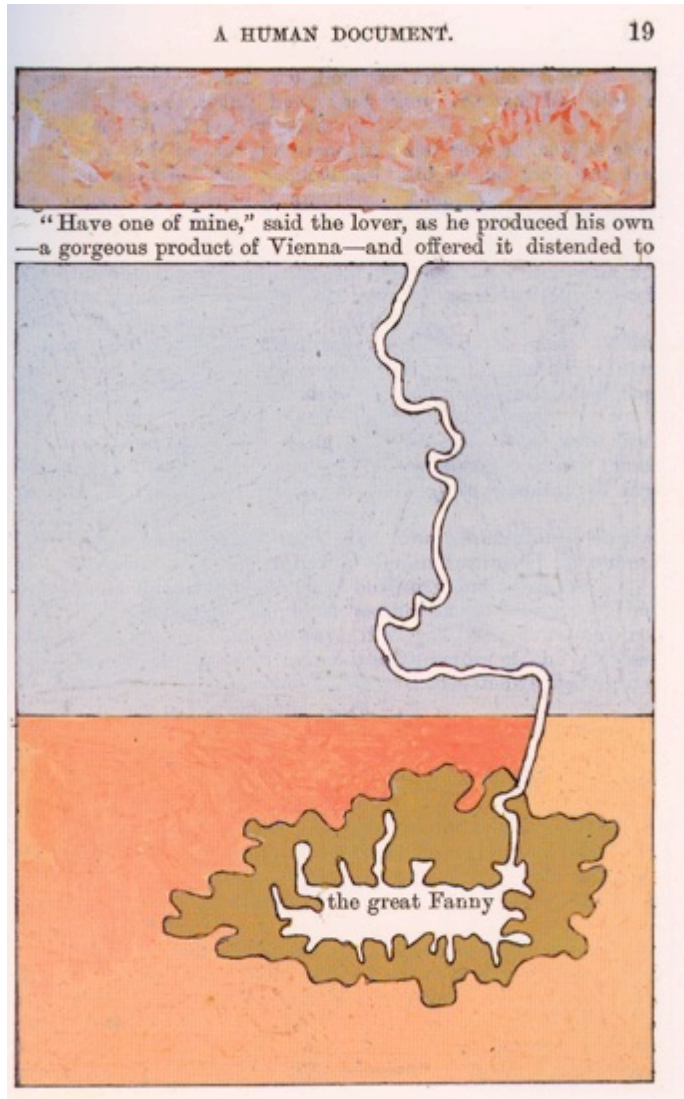Figure 18: "Toge Roused", *A Humument*, 2005, 16.

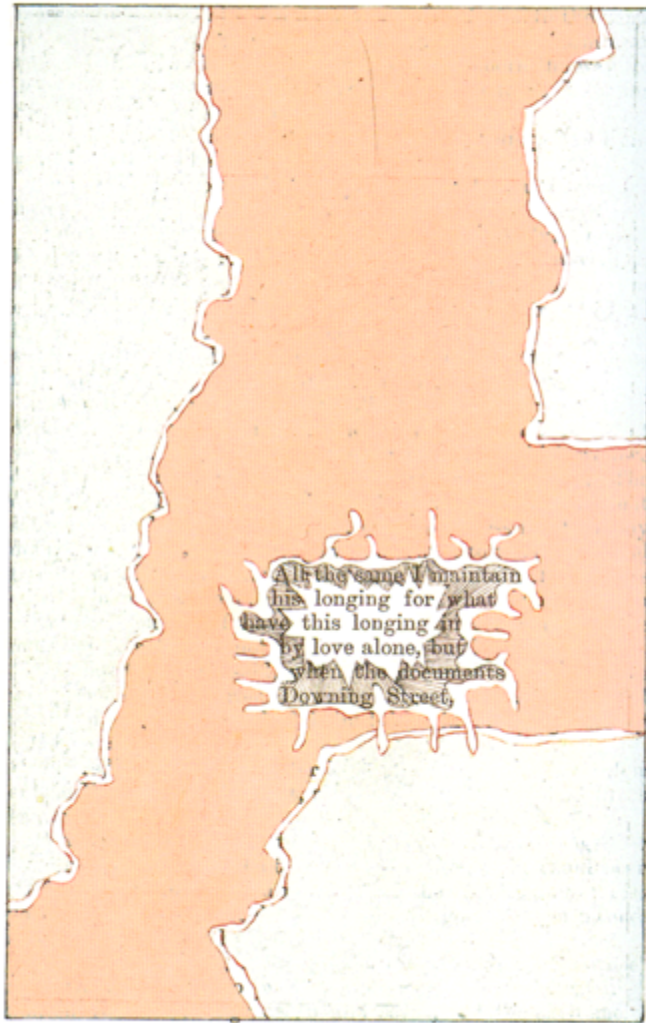Figure 19: The Great Fanny

360   A HUMAN DOCUMENT.

All the same I maintain
his longing for what
have this longing in
by love alone, but
when the documents
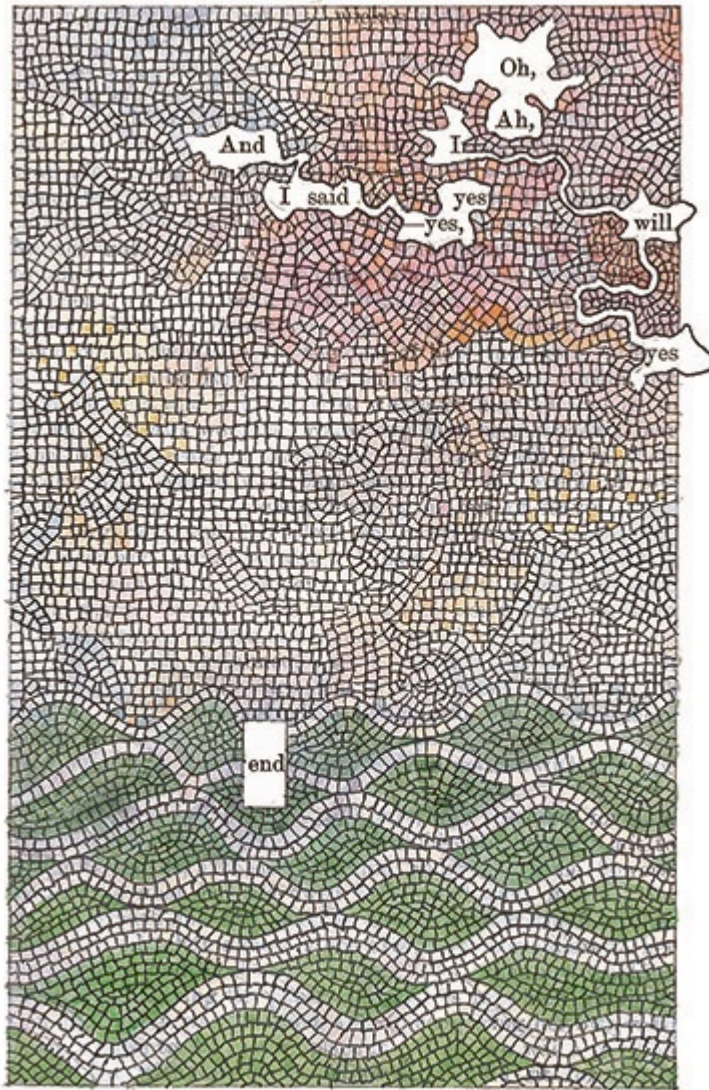Downing Street,

Figure 20: "Longing for the longing love alone"

Figure 21: Joycean Homage in *A Humument*
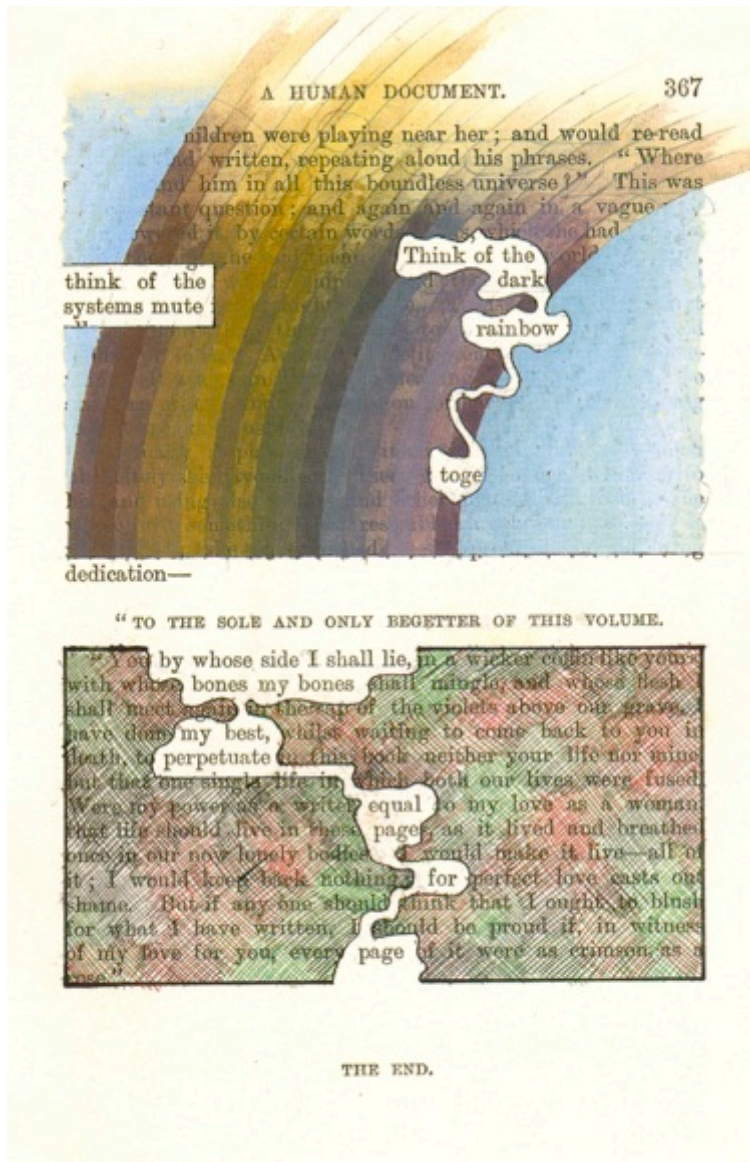
Figure 22: The Dedication to Shakespeare's Sonnets in *A Humument*

Acknowledgements

Notes

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[1] See Sartori and Goodlad's special issue on the ends of new historicism in *Victorian Studies*, forthcoming 2013.

[2] For recent examples of the secrecy plot in Neo-Victorian and steampunk fiction, see James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* (2002), Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002), Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2008), George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* (2008), Will Thomas's Barker and Llewellyn series, and Dan Simmons's *Drood* (2009).

[3] It is usual at the first mention of a primary text to cite its original publication date in parenthesis. *A Humument* makes this convention difficult, not least of all because the text's five major trade editions—published in 1980, 1987, 1997, 2005, and 2012)— contain variations. As such, *A Humument* (1980) cannot be said to be the same text as *A Humument* (2012). In addition to these five major versions, there are also a number of smaller, private editions of parts of the work or specific pages. Except where otherwise stated, this essay is based on the 2005 edition.

[4] OULIPO, acronym for "Ouvroir de Littérature Potentialle" (or "Workshop of Potential Literature"), describes a post-surrealist literary movement initiated by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lyonnais in 1960 which aimed to produce new forms of writing through the imposition of arbitrary restrictions or rules on the creative process. Its most famous product is George Perec's *La Disparition* (1969; translated into English as *A Void* in 1995), a novel which entirely excludes the letter "e"; more recent examples include George Rawle's *Woman's World* (2005) whose narrative is composed of cut-out words and phrases from nineteen-sixties women's magazines. For more on origins of OULIPO, see Warren F. Motte's edited essay collection, *OULIPO: A Primer of Potential Literature* (1986).

[5] For another account of the revisionary nature of neo-Victorianism, see Voigts-Virchow.

[6] Similar concerns about the potentially prurient and exploitive nature of neo-Victorian confession narratives are raised by Christian Gutleben and Mary-Luise Kohlke; see in particular their account of "traumatophilia".

[7] The most famous of these remains *The Little Professor* blog's "Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels" (Burstein).

[8] Latour writes:

> What's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is, teachable version of social critique…? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuing relentlessly. (228-9)

The article's somewhat disingenuous assumption that suspicion hitherto had exclusively progressive or radical associations is a major blind spot in what remains a bracing and deeply stimulating polemic.

[9] One might similarly question what drives the obsessive performance of exposure in so many neo-Victorian narratives, particularly those in that sub-genre described by Garrett Stewart as the "omitted person plot" (33) in which fringe or marginal characters from canonical Victorian texts, à la Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, are given central

narrative authority to tell their hitherto suppressed side of the story.[9] The omitted person plot claims to imaginatively restore what has previously been (apparently) buried— usually, but not always, the horrifying consequences of colonial domination and institutionalised misogyny. In this project, its aims are explicitly ethical; in its attendant pose of having forced out what the original text could or would not say, less so. Once iconoclastic, Christian Gutleben and Mary-Louise Kohlke argue, such acts of liberatory envoicement have the potential to become hackneyed when rehearsed compulsively before a modern audience for whom "historical trauma" can all too easily become "spectacle at a reassuring temporal remove" (8).

[10] Please note the key stipulating adjective here: I allude in this paragraph to specifically non-referential forms of steampunk without suggesting that all steampunk cultural production falls within this rubric. My 2011 article "Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style" examines the lively and often contentious relationship between historically-invested and extravagantly anti-referential forms of steampunk. Here I refer only to the latter category. For visual examples of this aesthetic, in which Victorian fashion is quoted but retrofitted to estrange it from its original context, readers may wish to consult the Flickr open source images from the Asylum Steampunk Convivial which has run annually in Lincoln, UK since 2009:
http://www.flickr.com/search/?w=all&q=steampunk+asylum&m=text.

[11] In making this claim for the non-hermeneutic status of these examples, I directly counter Matthew Beaumont's reading of *Une semaine de bonté* offered in his 2009 article "Cutting Up the Corpse." Here Beaumont declares that Ernst's images do indeed have a direct and explicitly historicist critical agenda: the novel, he states, is a "violent intervention in the pictography of the nineteenth century that pitilessly reveals the unconscious urges that the Victorians themselves repressed. Indeed, Ernst sought to portray nothing less than the unconscious of the nineteenth century…" (Beaumont 18). While I admire Beaumont's expansion of the historical parameters of neo-Victorianism prior to the 1960sdecade usually taken as inaugural, I find this reading unconvincing. Not only does it seem to rely on a familiar version of the repressive hypothesis— the Victorians as repressed, their predecessors as confidently liberated— but it seems to impute a historical teleology to the surrealists' understanding of the unconscious and its drives, one which I do not recognise in *Une semaine de bonté.*

[12] Not only, as Mary-Luise Kohlke has recently lamented, does the period from 1901 to 1960 remain almost entirely unrepresented in neo-Victorian scholarship (4), but also many contemporary neo-Victorian texts are explicated in terms of their rejection of the experimentalism of the modernist *avant garde* in favour of a return to the comforts of the realist narrative. For example, Heilmann and Llewellyn write that, "In many cases, it seems that…the neo-Victorian marks a return to the classic form of the nineteenth-century novel in a way that, structurally at least, seems often to negate the experiments of the modernist movement. Like Woolf's Lily Briscoe, contemporary novelists have their vision, but they must follow the lead of George Eliot in drawing it all together in the end" (16). For exceptions to the pre-1960 embargo, see Beaumont and Gilmour; for a discussion of the historical emergence of Neo-Victorianism, see Heilmann and Llewellyn .

[13] The question of what exactly constitutes an "artist's book" remains open to vigorous and stimulating debate. When I first discussed *A Humument* in this light, Mark Samuels Lasner, a world-leading expert on Victorian print culture, demurred at the classification on the basis that Phillip's work is based on the complete printed text of another author rather than his own independent creations. While sympathetic to this stipulation, my sense is that the distinction between found object and *sui generis* created works can sometimes be hard to draw in the

case of the artist's book (see Dieter Roth's *Daily Mirror* 1961), and I follow Joanna Drucker's assessment of *A Humument* as an "auratic" artist's book (108).

[14] See Dali's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1934), Picasso's *Histoire Naturelle* (1942), Matisse's *Jazz* (1947), Chagall's *Fables de La Fontaine* (1927-30), Dieter Roth's *Daily Mirror* (1961), and Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gas Stations* (1963).

[15] To say this is not to endorse a clichéd version of literary history which positions all writers designated as modernists in a unified and unvariegated opposition to, say, Victorian realism. I speak here specifically of the explicit anti-Victorian positions of writers such as Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and others.

[16] For more on the proto-post-modern elements of *A Human Document*, see articles by Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor and N. Kathleen Hayles .

[17] This collaborative rather than simply revisionist scope is also registered in the Author's Note to the 1980 edition, which reads "Self-evidently this work owes an incalculable debt to William Hurrell Mallock, the unwitting collaborator in its making. If supplementary fame accrues thereby to his name, may it compensate for any bruising of his spirit" (Phillips *A Humument* [1980] n.p.).

[18] Consider for example Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Dan Simmons' *Drood* (2009), both of which indict a fictionalised version of Charles Dickens for his exploitive relationships with women and the working classes.

[19] Caws writes that the lovers' fragmented history "runs on with enough coherence to pull you in" (24). I am less convinced than Caws that *A Humument* intends to draw readers into a textual centre; on the contrary, its movement seems decidedly more outwards and anti-centrifugal, leaping from a romance skeleton-plot into a series of encounters with different graphic styles and intertextual allusions.

[20] Although this desire to leave the explanatory material until the end is by no means unique, Phillip's retention of the term "introduction" rather than the more appropriate "afterword" to describe it suggests a deliberate contravention of typical textual order.

[21] See, for only a few examples among many, pages 94, 116, and 244 of the 2005 edition.

[22] Indeed, the phalluses and vaginas that erupt through the text seem to parody such forms of critique in a manner consistent with James Eli Adams's recent account of the famous Bardell vs. Pickwick trial scene in Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7). Sharing with Felski and others a resistance to clichéd forms of critical suspicion, Adams first asks why it has become so commonplace for scholars to adopt the idiom of interrogation when describing their practices, before demonstrating how Pickwick's trial satirises the misguided sexual suspicions of both the nineteenth-century legal establishment and, anticipatorily, the Victorian novel's contemporary interpreters alike. In his ability to find evidence of libertinage in such innocuous phrases as "Chops and Tomata sauce" (Dickens 426), the prosecutor Sergeant Buzfuz, argues Adams, "seem[s] to subject our own strategies of interrogation…to withering parody" (232). The hackhandedness of this technique is contrasted with the insistent lack—rather, importantly, than *failure*—of psychological depth in *The Pickwick Papers* which enables its dilatory comic form.

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