Gill Partington

Never mind the Mallocks: missing text in Tom Phillips's *A Humument*

Tom Phillips's A Humument invents a genre for itself - the 'treated Victorian novel'. The Victorian novel in question is William Hurrell Mallock's A Human Document of 1892, and the 'treatments' it receives at Phillips's hand are many and varied. Each page of Mallock's saggy and sanctimonious triple-decker has been painstakingly doctored, drawn and painted over, leaving visible isolated clusters of words and phrases. The result - part literature, part artwork - is unique, rich, playful, frequently beautiful and often hilarious. But it also asks a particular set of questions about writing, about originality and meaning, and about its relationship with its source text. Its distinctiveness as literature is that it begins with pages already populated by narrative, characters and type; it is 'written' not by generating words but by selectively obscuring them. Paradoxically, it is this process of excision that produces meaning, creating new conjunctions of phrases, and setting up an interplay between writing and image. Its opening page plays on precisely this inversion of concealment and revelation: 'That which he hid reveal I'.1 It is Mallock's verbose three-volume novel that hides its true meanings, and Phillips's, by obscuring, that brings these to light. Phillips elsewhere makes the same point more prosaically, contending that A Humument gives us the 'undertext of Mallock's original story of an upperclass cracker-barrel philosopher ex-poet and diplomat, who falls in love with a sexy prospective widow from Hampstead'.² But what exactly is the 'undertext' of Mallock's novel? What is revealed through this process of obscuring words?

Sex, is one answer. A Humument is as lewd as it is ludic, transforming Mallock's tale of a piously platonic affair into a riot of phallic imagery and sly *double entendres*. Critics have noted that these 'staid Victorian pages can conceal (hidden prudently away like weevils in a biscuit) a wittily raunchy moment', and 'nowhere is Phillips's impolite subversion more explicit than his excavations of sexual image and innuendo'.³ What's interesting is that this vocabulary of excavation and burrowing resonates with Phillips's own subterranean metaphors of 'undertexts', 'mining and undermining' A Human Document, and digging 'deeper shafts' into it.⁴ There is something of a Freudian ring to all this, hinting that A Humument is a return of the repressed, putting Mallock's decorous prose on the analyst's couch and

unearthing what lies buried below its conscious surface.⁵ It's a plausible reading. In place of Mallock's lovelorn protagonist, Robert Grenville, A Humument offers us as its central figure the more enigmatic 'Toge', not so much a character as a kind of libidinal principle. His story is one of pulses and desires, arousals, ecstasies and frustrations occurring mainly in pursuit of an elusive female figure. It's an earthy, non-linear and oddly dreamlike narrative; a picaresque romp in cut-up poetry. We might read Toge as a kind of manifestation of the textual unconscious, arguing that Phillips rearticulates and revisits Mallock's theme of thwarted romantic love, bringing out its implicit sexual meanings. The eroticism repressed by A Human Document is ... recovered, "exhumed," by A Humument,' writes Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor: 'Mallock's delicate narrative, which downshifts the expression of raw desire into a mannered expression of yearning, is revised by Phillips's effort to (literally) draw out the experience of physical desire'.⁶A Humument becomes, in this reading, one long and colourful Freudian slip, allowing Mallock's buttoned-up novel to say what's really on its mind.

Yet, this question of the 'undertext' can be approached from a different, more literal angle. Craig Dworkin's recent book *No Medium* is about missing texts, and begins with the same apparent paradox as *A Humument*: 'Erasures obliterate, but they also reveal'. The kind of erasure to which he refers is total; works in which words feature only as absence. Dworkin traces a genealogy of the empty page in art and literature, including the fictional blank journal *Nudisme* which appears in Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orphée*, the ream of unused typing paper published by Aram Saroyan in 1968, and Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953. He argues that such absence of text

lays bare the page itself: physical facture of the book as an object; the substrate of print; the typical technology support of poetry at midcentury. . . . In the absence of inscription, the substrate can be seen not as transparent signifier, but as an object in its own right, replete with its own material properties, histories, and signifying potential.⁷

A Humument is not a blank book of that sort with which Dworkin concerns himself. Strictly speaking, it is a palimpsest rather than an erasure, obscuring text by painting and drawing over rather than removing it. Nevertheless, Phillips's treatments produce much the same effect as Dworkin's blank pages, working in a variety of ways to draw our attention to the page, and to the 'substrate' of print. The 'undertext' with which *A Humument* confronts us is what physically lies underneath the text.

The entry point into such an alternative reading is provided, surprisingly, by Mallock's novel, which opens not with its two star-crossed lovers, but with

a meditation of sorts on the nature of the book, and the complex relationship between the material page and its semantic content. *A Human Document* is structured as a 'book within a book', framed by an introduction in which the narrator relates how he is entrusted with a document which tells the true story of a social scandal; an extra-marital romance between Robert Grenville and Irma Schilizzi. The narrator's initial encounter with this text is striking:

I saw lying on my table, not what I had pictured to myself – a small, unpretending packet, which I could have held in my hand, and put with my pocket-handkerchief under my pillow, but a great folio volume bound like a photographic scrap-book, the sight of which filled me with dismay.⁸

What overwhelms him at first is the bulk of this volume, its sheer, off-putting physicality and its messy, disparate quality. He describes its coarse construction and different textures, its 'leaves of thick cartridge paper' with manuscript pages of various sizes and shapes pasted onto these. It is predominantly written in a 'feminine hand', but this is interrupted by 'pages after pages of letters, scraps of poetry, various other documents'.⁹ Yet, as he begins to read, the incoherence and untidiness of this papery bundle recedes into the background and vanishes, as he becomes caught up in its contents. He ceases to register the act of deciphering the text in front of him, but instead loses himself in the events and characters described. His reading experience takes on a sense of immediacy to the extent that he hears and sees what he reads about: he 'seemed to be listening to the voice of a living woman, who was confessing to me', and feels as if 'a woman's eyes were looking at me, and that her lips, as she spoke, had a deprecating smile on them, or that they trembled'.¹⁰ His absorption, described in sensual, almost erotic terms, transforms the writing from inert, papery bundle into 'living tissue, wounded and quivering with sensation'."

It is exactly this kind of highly immersive reading practice which, Sven Birkerts has argued, characterises our engagement with novels. Birkerts, delivering an impassioned defence of the culture of the book, describes the reading of fiction as a special kind of imaginative engagement with words. His description is similar to that of Mallock's narrator, involving a kind of hermeneutic alchemy through which the page ceases to be an opaque, twodimensional surface, and becomes instead a means to transport us into a living, breathing space beyond: 'When we read, we create and then occupy a hitherto non-existent interior locale'.¹² But accessing this place involves a degree of absorption, which effects a transcendence of the book's materiality; we have to ignore its opaque surfaces and printed words at the same time as we engage with them. Describing his own childhood entry into reading, he recounts the discovery that 'On the far side of that plane of scrambled markings was a complete other world. And then one day the path became clear ... I went over, around and suddenly *through* the enormous letter shapes ... And from that moment on the look of a word became a window onto its meaningful depths.¹³ The pages of novels invite us to read through them, to lose ourselves in narrative, but this readerly hermeneutic of depth and space involves a suppression of the page itself, a strategic forgetting of its flat, printed surface.

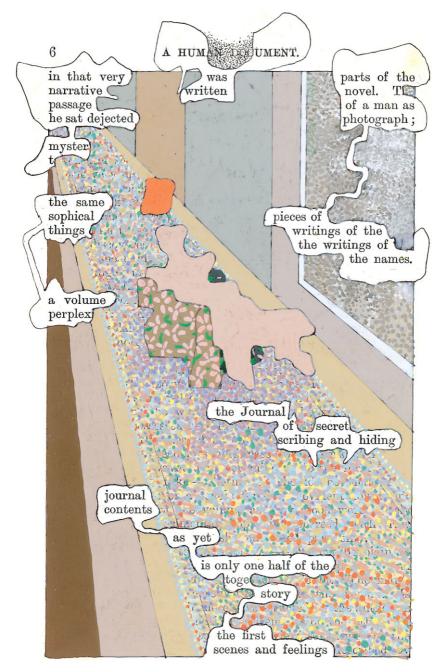
True, what Mallock's narrator is reading is not a novel, but a different kind of object. He holds in his hands not the printed, bound pages of a book, but a set of papers incorporated into the handwritten leaves of a scrapbook or journal. It is, however, a novel-in-waiting. The narrator has been entrusted with the papers because he is a writer by trade. He has been given the task of rewriting, smoothing out the bumps and joins in this disparate collection of texts, and making its various voices cohere into a readable, believable whole. The unnamed narrator is effectively Mallock's fictional stand-in. The framing device of the found document positions him as the intermediary who now offers us this version of events in the form of a novel entitled A Human Document. And so, having enacted the disappearance of the page through his own immersive act of reading, his task is to ensure that others may do the same. He - and by extension Mallock - encourages us as readers to repeat the same kind of vanishing act on the novel, to enter into it so completely that we are able to forget its material form, to read 'through' its pages and enter the narrative world beyond.

These same introductory passages, as reworked by Phillips, pull in precisely the opposite direction. They demand a very different kind of engagement, forcing our attention back onto the page itself. Page 5 of A Human Document describes deciphering the scrapbook, whose fragmented character makes it uneasy reading at first, with its disparate narrative voices and its continuity broken in many places by the insertion of various documents'.14 Phillips's treated version of this page in A Humument (fourth edition) gives us an illustration of a yellowing sheet, overlaying the original text, spilling into the margins and beyond. Like the scrapbook, here is papery layer on top of papery layer, yet this one cannot invite us in, absorb and seduce us with its story. It cannot resolve itself into narrative meaning at all, since it is covered with something that resembles handwriting, but is actually illegible scrawl. The sheet's serrated edges suggest tearing and violence, and jagged gaps here and there allow stuttering, repetitious fragments and phrases from Mallock's novel to peep through. These seem to allude simultaneously not only back to the scene of reading underneath, but also to Phillips's treated page: 'broken the besides journal, and poken the impression journal The first discrepancy. Journal the Journal.¹⁵ Some

phrases are joined in a way that indicates a top-to-bottom trajectory for the reading eye, but our ingrained Western inclination to read from left to right cuts across this, with the result that there are various routes which we might take around the page, piecing together the phrases in different combinations. None of these solutions helps us to arrive at a narrative sense, however. We are presented with a page that suggests irresolvable questions of reading and interpretation, and with its own doubled, papery, torn surface. *A Human Document* depicts pages dematerialising effortlessly in the reverie of reading, but in *A Humument*, as Katherine Hayles has argued, 'the page is never allowed to disappear', but always 'insists on its materiality'.¹⁶

The following page of *A Humument* introduces us to the figure of Toge, a flat, pink, featureless blancmange, vaguely humanoid, apparently reclining on a piece of furniture. We seem to be in a domestic interior or hallway of some kind, and the receding perspective suggests pictorial space. But it is shallow, cramped and non-naturalistic, decorative as much as illusionistic, with Mallock's text itself still visible very faintly but nevertheless partially legible underneath the pattern of carpet and walls. Surrounding Toge are islands of text; isolated parts of Mallock's introduction resembling speech bubbles. Again, these refer elliptically back to the events described by Mallock's narrator, but at the same time allude to what occurs in Phillips's illustration: 'in that very narrative passage he sat dejected ... journal contents as yet is only one half of the toge story'.¹⁷ Toge is indeed sat in a narrative passage, in more that one sense: his figure is superimposed in the midst of Mallock's passages of text, but he is also depicted as seated in a narrow passageway. The wordplay gestures in two directions at once, highlighting the way text and image overlap and cut across each other, and making us unsure quite how to engage with this page. For Mallock's narrator, words give way to illusion: Reading means penetrating and transcending the inscribed surface, 'seeing' and 'hearing' the characters as if they are real. In Phillips's version this scenario is both inverted and subverted. In reading AHumument we, too, perceive the image of a character, but not through absorptive reading of the text. Instead, the image is right there on the surface, and we see through it to the typeface underneath. Visual illusion gives way to words, rather than vice versa, and penetrating the inscribed plane of the page brings us not into an immersive narrative world, but reveals yet more layers of inscription. Phillips's illustration suggests the possibility of immersive space at the same time as it undercuts this through its conjunctions of text and image.

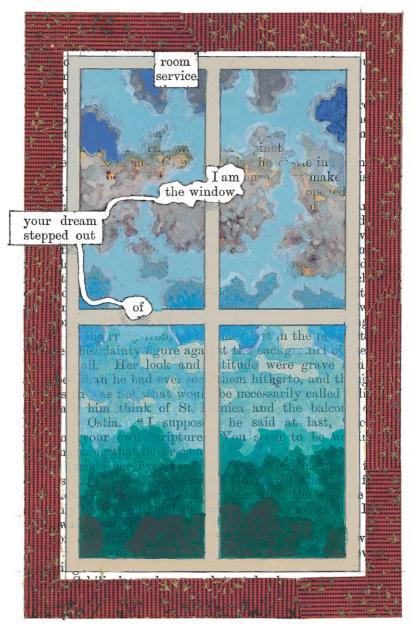
A Humument plays games with the conventions of novel reading. If the pages of a novel are supposed to create an illusion of space and a world beyond them, to conjure characters from between their lines of printed text, then



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A HUMAN DOCUMENT.



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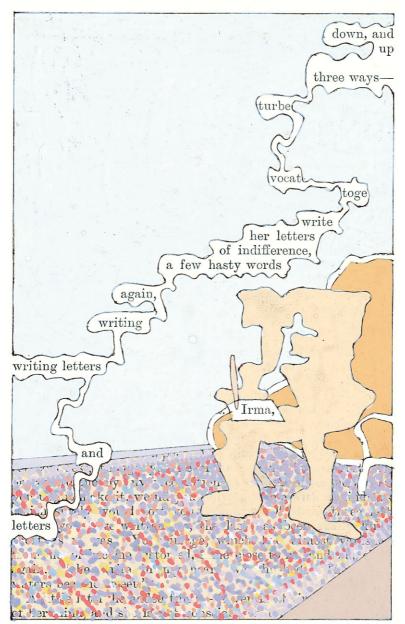
Phillips renders this imagined synaesthesia perversely and almost comically literal.¹⁸ He turns the pages of the novel into images: A Humument does not have characters, plot or settings in the same way as Mallock's novel, but it has indistinct human figures that chase each other across the pages, moving through different visual styles and occupying shallow and shifting visual space. In doing this work of visualising for us. A Humument makes the notion of imagining three-dimensional space through a two-dimensional paper surface seem deeply odd. The book performs a peculiarly self-reflexive form of auto-critique, as word and image interrogate each other. If, in Sven Birkerts's formulation, a novel's page functions as a window, then on page 98 of A Humument, it explicitly declares as much. The whole page is an illustration of a window with a frame around the edge and panes opening onto a scene beyond, of clouds and treetops. Hovering in the sky, however, faint but not entirely obscured by its blue colour, is Mallock's original page 98. Fragments of this text, outlined and isolated in Phillips's trademark 'islands' declare 'I am the window your dream stepped out of'. Here is the page itself addressing the reader directly, advertising its own illusion and breaking the spell. This game-playing both invokes and refuses immersion because we are presented simultaneously with opacity and transparency, the plane of the page and the space of illusion.

Toge's 'iconography' also oscillates between flatness and depth. He is often featured with 'a carpet and a window looking out onto a forest' while 'his amoeba-like ever-changing shape is always formed from the rivers in the type'.¹⁹ This conjunction of elements is really a collision of different kinds of space, holding out the possibility of escape into an exterior world of three dimensions and at the same time presenting us with a shallow, awkwardly confining interior space and with the pinkish silhouette of Toge himself. Only occasionally does he acquire detail, appearing as a clown or with cartoonish facial features. He is surely a unique figure in literature in that he is 'nothing more that the play of linguistic and visual surface', coming into existence only through the accidents and exigencies of the mise en page, appearing whenever the words 'together' or 'altogether' occur in the original novel.²⁰ He's a peculiar inversion of Mallock's hero: Grenville is a poet, a producer of text, whereas Toge is produced by text. Grenville is a recognisable 'type' (urbane, worldweary poet manqué), but Toge is a character made purely of type. To see Toge is to read between the lines quite literally, to see a kind of negative image of the page. Where we normally read its marks, Toge makes us perceive the gaps between these marks, and the blankness of the page itself underneath the typewritten letters. And, having no form other than the shifting outlines lent to him by the page, he cannot be imagined as 'real', or existing beyond the book.

Toge may be a manifestation of the textual unconscious, then, but not in a Freudian sense of something authentic and primal; an Id lurking deep beneath or behind Mallock's writing. Toge is closer to Lacan's sense of the unconscious as the movement of drive or desire that is an effect of language itself, that can be perceived only in the play of words, in gaps and ellipses and absences of sense.²¹ 'The unconscious is structured like a language', according to Lacan's dictum, and Toge is literally structured - shaped - like words printed on the page. His form obscures text, but in hiding it he makes it strangely visible and visibly strange. It is no longer fully legible, but what we perceive in place of narrative sense are its contours and the space it takes up on the page. We are compelled to look *at*, rather than *read*, the written page. Toge may be a return of the repressed, but we should see this not (just) in terms of desire, but in terms of textual materiality: what is not permitted to surface in Mallock's novel is surface itself. The physical fact of the page is supressed in order for the spatial illusions of character, plot, setting to function. Toge is the page in person, and a point at which fiction's illusions collapse and fold into one another like a house of cards. To see Toge writing, for instance, which he does on several occasions, is to see the page writing itself. He sits composing a missive to the object of his desire, but the letter in his hand is plainly a string of letters highlighted through proximity to their obscured neighbours.²² His pen is poised over the note, but it is only a rectangular box drawn onto the page, an outlined block of four characters -'Irma' - the wrong way up, and no more or less two-dimensional than Toge himself. Just as in M.C. Escher's sketch in which a pair of hands draw themselves, the paradox of illusion is laid bare through being twisted into an impossible recursive geometry.

Mallock's novel, with its introductory framing scene of immersive reading points towards a world on the other side of the 'plane of scrambled markings', but A Humument points us back to the markings themselves, and this flat plane of the page. It explores what we as readers do with this surface, and how we translate it into meanings, into reading experiences, even into visual, auditory, or sensory information. It is a playful engagement with - and subversion of – what the pages of books are supposed to do. It pulls them in all kinds of directions, exploring what their limits and potentials are. On the pages of A Humument, incommensurable kinds of space jostle for space. It invokes yet refuses the conventional idea of immersion and reading through the text, but instead makes its pages work in a different way, oscillating between flatness and illusion, two-dimensional surface and the threedimensional hermeneutics of transparency and depth that we are accustomed to reading into it. A Humument erases in order to reveal, and what is revealed are the spatial parameters and materiality of its own medium. So, while Mallock's narrator has the task of finishing the manuscript he reads;

A HUMAN DOCUMENT.



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tying up its narrative loose ends and disparate voices, and rendering it seamless and complete, the task of *A Humument*, by contrast, is one of 'unfinishing'. Phillips unbinds Mallock's novel, dismantling it not only in a literal sense in order to carry out his treatments on separate leaves, but also symbolically.²³ When Phillips presents us with images of a scrawled and torn sheet of paper, a photograph, a postcard, or when Toge clutches his letter to Irma, *A Humument* effectively turns Mallock's novel back into the imagined scrapbook of disparate leaves and fragments of which it is composed; letters, journals, manuscript sheets.

A Humument intervenes in its source text to make the book's physical form reappear, rendering it messy, papery, but also, crucially, incomplete. For the past fifty years Phillips has been reworking Mallock's pages, and continues to do so. As of 2012 it is in its fifth edition, and continues to evolve, assuming digital form in an iPhone app, and incorporating historical events and its author's own passing years (there are references to the 9/11 bombings, and to Phillips's landmark fiftieth and seventieth birthdays). In its openness, its rapacious intertextuality, A Humument ceaselessly absorbs other kinds of pages into itself. It's a book made of other books, not only because it overwrites an existing text, but because it interleaves this Victorian novel with references to modernist experimentation, concrete poetry, cut-up texts, children's books, photo-albums, postcards, comic books.²⁴ Daniel Traister describes it as 'an anthology of the entire history of the book', but this is to miss the point slightly.²⁵ A Humument does not simply anthologise or 'represent' the history of the book; it places itself in the flux of that history, so that the very concept of 'the book' as a coherent, bounded and stable entity comes into question. Rather than dealing with two fixed, discrete, complete works - an original novel and its 'treated' version - it seems we are faced with an irrevocably tangled network of material (and now digital) pages. We cannot unpick these threads or trace them back to a single, pristine, untreated source. Mallock's novel is impossible to read except through its more famous, treated, incarnation. Lying obscure and out of print for decades, it has a readership once again, but A Human Document is itself changed, existing now as a kind of addition and footnote to its successor, allowing Phillips's readers to see what is revealed once his erasures are themselves erased.²⁶

A Humument is a supplement to Mallock's novel, but one that operates, as in Derrida's logic of supplementarity, to problematise the status of the original. Looking backwards through the treated lens of *A Humument*, it's impossible to locate a definitive, originary text or starting point in this story of continual reworking and unfinishing. *A Humument* begins by reanimating another book; a cheap, single volume reprint of Mallock's novel found in a junk shop. That book is not itself the three-volume 'original', therefore, but something already materially altered and secondary. There were numerous



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Item Details

A human document : a novel / W. H. Mallock.
Mallock, W. H. (William Hurrell), 1849-1923.
1895
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reprints and editions in fact, each changing the layout of type, and in some cases involving significant textual erasure. (Foreign expressions were excised for an American market, for instance, and the New York edition of 1892 is shorter as a result). Phillips thus intervenes in pages that are already marked by their existence in the world, by copy editors, printers, even readers; a fact which he acknowledges:

Lest I should think myself the first to doctor this work I happened upon a copy . . . that had belonged to Lottie Yates who had herself treated it with much heavy underlining and word encircling that seemed to reflect her own Togeian romantic plight, sighing into the margin from time to time 'How true!'²⁷ The excisions and treatments of *A Humument* reveal Mallock's pages as objects with (to use Dworkin's terms) their own material properties and signifying potential, but also their own 'histories'. These are pages whose history is still ongoing; passing through different hands, being remediated, reappropriated, reworked. Phillips was not the first to meddle with Mallock, and he may not be the last. Recent reissues have produced new variations: a print on demand edition available from Amazon.com comprises only the first two volumes of Mallock's three-volume novel, for instance, inadvertently producing a different, more open 'ending' and an altogether more morally ambiguous book.²⁸ The epub online version, meanwhile, relies on character recognition software to scan and translate the imperfect and fading type of a century-old novel into digital text. The resulting errors and misreadings intermittently produce treatments as startling and surreal as some of Phillips's:

Listen to the fiutej" she said. '*To-day has been full of music. To go to the castle would make to-morrowfall oi it also. Find out aboi^ getdog there, and this crsning I will teil you if I can manage it' 'He met her at the band^ after dinner. The^r staged tb^s" for a shod time only. The scene struck bodi of them as artificial, after their late eaq)eEiences; but he sat withiher Icmg enough, to CDnyioce her that the expedition ivias an eaay one^ aad when he.said good-night to her she had agreed to undertake it witiz hinr.²⁹

Notes

- 1 Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, 4th edn (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 1. The new, fifth edition now reads 'I have to hide to reveal', emphasising the paradox.
- 2 Phillips, 'Notes on A Humument', in A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel, 4th edn.
- 3 'HUMUMENT.COM A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel, 1973, by William H. Gass', http://humument.com/essays/gass.html (accessed 2 August 2013); James Kidd, 'Every Day of my Life is Like a Page', *Literary Review*, July 2012, 58.
- 4 'HUMUMENT.COM The Official Site of *A HUMUMENT* by Tom Phillips'; http://humument.com/intro.html (accessed 2 September 2013).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, 'A Portrait of the (Postmodern) Artist: Intertextual Subjectivity in Tom Phillips's A Humument', *Post Identity*, 1999; http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.pid9999.0002.104.
- 7 Craig Dworkin, No Medium (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 9.
- 8 W. H. Mallock, A Human Document (London: Chapman and Hall, 1892) 3.
- 9 Ibid. 4.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid. 5.

- 12 Sven Birkerts, The Gutenberg Elegies (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006), 98.
- 13 Ibid., 35.
- 14 Mallock, A Human Document, 5.
- 15 Phillips, 'Notes on A Humument'.
- 16 N. Katherine Hayles, Writing Machines (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002), 94. James Maynard likewise points out that A Humument 'foregrounds the materiality of its construction' (James L. Maynard, 'I Find / I Found Myself / and / Nothing / More Than That": Textuality, Visuality, and the Production of Subjectivity in Tom Phillips'A Humument', Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association, 36 (2003), 89.)
- 17 Phillips, 'Notes on A Humument'.
- 18 Various commentators have noted that A Humument's presentation involves a kind of sytheasthesia. See Maynard, 'I Find / I Found Myself', 82.
- 19 Phillips, 'Notes on A Humument'.
- 20 Maynard, 'I Find / I Found Myself', 91.
- 21 For a different Lacanian approach to *A Humument*, see Maynard and Wagner-Lawlor. *A Humument* has attracted more than its fair share of psychoanalytic readings, but these have focused on the transcendental unity or radical disjunction of subjectivity, rather than of the text.
- 22 Phillips, A Humument, 249.
- 23 The first copy was treated while bound, but subsequent copies have been dismantled, as Phillips writes: http://humument.com/intro.html.
- 24 Adam Smyth points out intertextual references to Donne, Forster, Joyce, Shakespeare and Beckett. (Adam Smyth, 'Double Act', *London Review of Books*, 34:19 (2012), 35).
- 25 'HUMUMENT.COM Tom Phillips and A HUMUMENT, by Daniel Traister'; http://humument.com/essays/traister01.html (accessed 3 September 2013).
- 26 The Humument.com webpage provides scanned images of each page of *A* Humument, as they have progressed through various versions and editions, also showing the corresponding page of Mallock's novel. The pages of *A* Human Document are displayed here as 'versions' of *A* Humument.
- 27 Phillips, 'Notes on A Humument'.
- 28 W. H. Mallock, *A Human Document* (United States: Elibron Classics; Adamant Media Corporation, 2005).
- 29 http://www.archive.org/details/humandocumentnov01malluoft (accessed 1 September 2013).