

Book-eating Book: Tom Phillips's *A Humument* (1966-)*

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The history of the world, my sweet— [...]—
—is who gets eaten and who get to eat. (Sondheim 105)

In *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001), Christian Gutleben notes that it was “in the 1980s and 1990s that many British novelists [...] unearthed and resuscitated the great Victorian tradition” (5-6). Gutleben’s quote speaks to the rapid rise of the neo-Victorian genre which occurred in the last two decades of the twentieth century. With the publication of Peter Carey’s and A. S. Byatt’s bestselling and Booker Prize-winning *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *Possession* (1990) respectively, the genre entered the literary mainstream and has remained there ever since. The neo-Victorian phenomenon has also been evident in other forms of entertainment and in scholarly research. Production companies regularly offer television and film adaptations and modernisations of Victorian classics; the Booker Prize shortlist has featured novels with at least some nineteenth-century elements almost every year for the past fifteen years; the study of neo-Victorian fiction has become an established academic discipline, manifested in the founding of the journal of *Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008 as well as in the publication of an increasing number of articles and book-length studies (see Stetz 345).¹

Despite its growth in the late twentieth century, many scholars trace the birth of the neo-Victorian genre back to 1966. Academics choose this date as the starting point for the genre as it was in this year that

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debho0252.htm>>.

Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a part revision and part pre-quel to Charlotte Brontë's canonical *Jane Eyre* (1847). In Rhys's work, some of the tropes and genre elements that make up the neo-Victorian were established, such as re-appropriating a Victorian story for revisionist perspectives and imagining an embodied existence for historically marginalised characters, and as a result, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has become for many the foundational text of the neo-Victorian genre.

1966 proves a fitting start date for the neo-Victorian genre for another reason: it was the year Tom Phillips began his long-running literary and artistic project *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*.² In

this work, which Phillips is still continuing (the fifth and latest edition was published in 2012),³ he treats every page of W. H. Mallock's relatively unknown novel *A Human Document* (1892) by hand, through cutting, painting, pasting, circling, pencilling, collaging, typing and covering over, so that only a handful of words from the source text remain on each page. For example, Phillips crosses "an Doc" out of the original *A Human Document* to form the new title *A Humument* (Figure 1, fourth edition). His texts may seem random, and indeed occasionally the

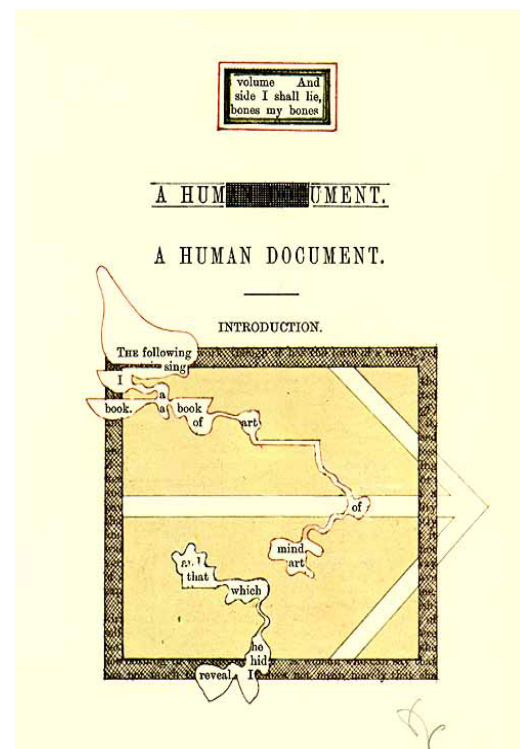


Figure 1

words have been selected by chance, through such procedures as tossing coins ("Notes on *A Humument*," hereafter Notes 2005), but for the most part, they are deliberately chosen and the result is that *A Humument* tells the adventure of a modern-day protagonist called Bill Toge. That the new story entirely derives from material and words used in the Victorian novel and is changing with each new edition not only calls to mind Frankenstein's patchwork creature but also suggests the malleability of texts and postmodernist deconstruction—

Phillips is literally deconstructing and reconstructing the Victorian source novel.

At first glance, some may consider *A Humument* an “unlikely” neo-Victorian novel. To begin with, it is in many ways not a novel at all but a piece of visual art. It is also constantly being revised by Phillips, which puts it at odds with the typical notion of a novel, a form that is largely set when published. Also, even at its most novelistic, *A Humument* does not demonstrate the *purposeful* return to the Victorian which characterises other texts in the genre. Neo-Victorian novels, according to Dana Shiller,

adopt a postmodern approach to history and [...] are set at least partially in the nineteenth century. This capacious umbrella includes texts that revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and “new” Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions. (558)

Shiller’s definition highlights the neo-Victorian novels’ deliberate return to the Victorian.⁴ This consciousness is explicit in the writers’ choice of revisiting existing and often well-known Victorian novels, historical personae and fictional characters as well as their attempt to replicate Victorian literary styles. None of this is found in *A Humument*. True, the book has received some attention in the neo-Victorian field,⁵ but its neo-Victorianness needs closer scrutiny, especially in relation to the sense of purpose mentioned above. Phillips’s narrative is set in the modern-day and does not (re)tell a Victorian story. Unlike other neo-Victorian writers, Phillips is not intentionally trying to evoke a sense of the past. He writes in the Notes (2005) that he bought Mallock’s book for his project simply because it fit the rules he had set: “the first (coherent) book I could find for threepence.” It is purely by chance, then, that Phillips chose Mallock’s novel as the source text for his artistic experiment. It may thus be somewhat reductive to regard *A Humument* as a neo-Victorian work just because its source material is Victorian. Phillips did not purposefully seek inspiration from a Victorian novel (his technique could reasonably be

applied to any book from any period) nor does he have anything substantial to say about nineteenth-century history or literature.⁶

Yet, even though Phillips's return to the Victorian was initiated by chance, I consider *A Humument* to be a "representative" neo-Victorian novel. The fact that Phillips's book is crafted from the Victorian source (in its most literal and material sense) is a physical manifestation of contemporary nostalgia for the materiality, form and texture of Victorian books. This nostalgia pervades much of neo-Victorian fiction, especially in terms of cover designs, maps, epigraphs, and other paratextual elements borrowed from the nineteenth century.⁷ Also, just like most neo-Victorian novels, *A Humument* responds to and teases out the underlying themes and elements of its Victorian source. Phillips remarks in an interview that some elements in Mallock's text are "waiting to be discovered, but not in an active sense. In a passive or innocent sense. Innocent of what is done to them. What is done to them might enrich them" (Interview).⁸ His description can equally be applied to many neo-Victorian novels' treatment of their nineteenth-century sources. Additionally, as Daniel Traister points out, the artistic methods that Phillips adopts aptly correspond to the manuscripts which make up Mallock's work. The story of the Victorian novel has ostensibly been pieced together by the narrator out of different written materials characterised by "baffled and crippled sentences" (9), "abrupt transitions" and "odd lapses of grammar." According to Traister, *A Humument* is thus "a literal reconstruction of *A Human Document* which Mallock (or his narrator) has allegedly constructed in much the same way, using materials just as refractory—and just as malleable."

More importantly, *A Humument's* relationship with its Victorian source can be configured as that between eater and eaten, a relationship that embodies some of the fundamental characteristics of the neo-Victorian genre. Phillips himself considers Mallock's novel as food, asserting that for his purposes, the Victorian text is "a feast" (Notes) and that he has "eaten 11 or 12 copies of *The Human Document*" (Interview). With this in mind, the word "Treated" in the book's subtitle

takes on gastronomic connotations: the Victorian novel is like premium cured meat or a delightful treat to be savoured. But what has *A Human Document* to do with food? Jason Scott-Warren believes that “we habitually use images associated with eating to describe the processes of reading and writing.” What does regarding *A Human Document* as edible usefully say about the relationship between the contemporary and the Victorian?

Understanding *A Human Document* as food suggests that the contemporary work relies on the Victorian text as material nourishment, which it uses to sustain its own individual body. For Phillips, Mallock’s *A Human Document* has been an indispensable source of artistic nourishment for his own project for almost five decades. In fact, *A Human Document* is almost the *only* source of material for Phillips, as one of his rules in the creation of *A Humument* is that “no extraneous material should be imported in the work” (Interview).⁹ The contemporary text is thus produced through the intertextual consumption of the body of the Victorian work in its entirety. If *A Human Document* provides a nourishing and extravagant meal for *A Humument*, it is also a banquet that has not yet come to an end. In Mallock’s novel, Phillips has been able to find a constant source for new inspiration.¹⁰ As he said in Notes, he has “extracted from it over one thousand texts, and [has] yet to find a situation, statement or thought which its words cannot be adapted to cover” (Notes 2005). And the number of variations has only increased since. Some have taken in contemporary events. For example, in the Humument App (released in 2010), which shows the project embracing the latest technology, one page reads: “pasted on to the present / see, it is nine eleven / the time singular / which broke down illusion” (4). In newer editions, Phillips has also used himself—his biography—in the project, saying that “I’ll never write an autobiography, so I have an autobiography that appears in this form” (Interview). This suggests that he has incorporated his own life into the work, demonstrating a communion between the Victorian, neo-Victorian, and himself. Phillips comments, “[Mallock] might desist from turning in his undiscovered grave at the thought that he

has been in some way perpetuated through me as I through him" (Introduction).

If the relationship between the contemporary and the Victorian can be understood as that between eater and eaten, the relationship is also characterised by a sense of aggressive ambivalence. The eater desires food, but because of his reliance on it for nourishment, he has become vulnerable. Moreover, he must destroy the food in order to absorb its substances for sustenance. In an ideal situation, the distinction between the eater and food eventually collapses, and there is total identity between the two as the food becomes part of the eater's body. In Phillips's treatment of Mallock's novel, we see this interplay between aggression, ambivalence, and communion. *A Humument* must rely on the material body of the source text for its artistic expression. In each edition of *A Humument*, Mallock's novel is consumed by Phillips's contemporary text. The result is that the Victorian work is digested and used to create a new textual body. In this new formation, only a distorted and stripped-down version of the Victorian original (in the form of slivers of texts) remains clearly evident. Importantly, even though the Victorian text is incorporated, it is not completely destroyed; otherwise Phillips's project can no longer be continued. The appropriation of the Victorian by the contemporary, in the case of *A Humument*, transubstantiates the body of the Victorian book into the body of the contemporary work.

That the contemporary and the Victorian texts literally and physically share the same space—in fact, co-exist in *one body*—speaks to the sense of one text cannibalising another.¹¹ In fact, the "body" is a recurrent visual motif and metaphor which appears in much of Phillips's work—a constant reminder of *text as body* (as in the idiomatic expression "the body of the text"). The process of textual cannibalism is perhaps self-reflexively depicted in some of the pages from *A Humument* itself. In Figure 2, from the fourth and fifth edition, for example, we can see that Phillips has painted the entire page from Mallock's work in red, black and white to form a grotesque female figure, sitting in profile, apparently turned inside out.

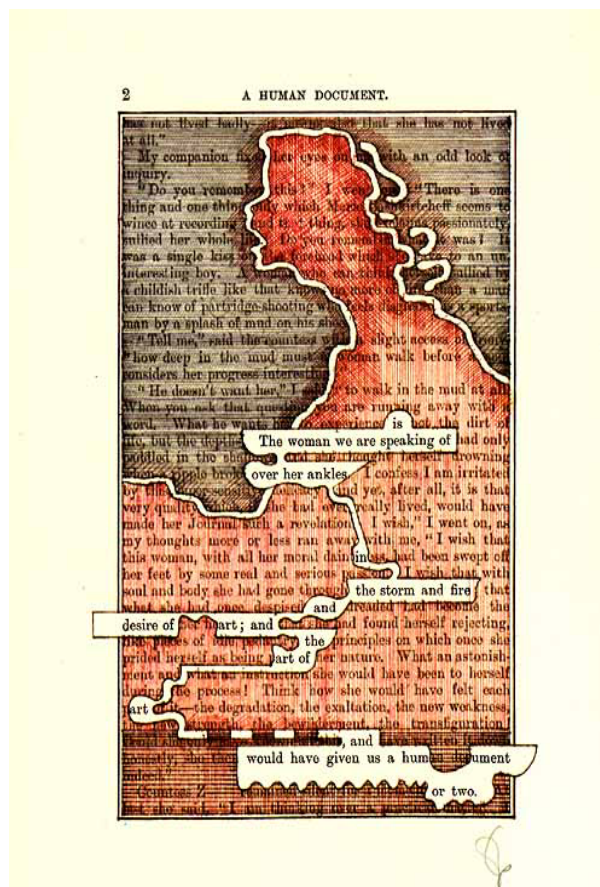


Figure 2

This female, mouth slightly ajar, appears to be eating the black text, which hovers around her. The bulk of her red form is reminiscent of the inside of a human with connected white parts, suggesting intestines, within which words in black are in the process of being digested and absorbed. In this image, Phillips has her feed off the very text she is made from. In this interaction between text and image, we witness an explicit, unambiguous illustration of the process of textual cannibalism and communion at work. It might also be considered a visual representation of Phillips's treatment of Mallock's work as a whole: one book eating and living off another for its own existence and expression. The result is a kind of deformed textual body, in which different layers of the work are evident and reveal the transformation that has been undertaken. The book has in a sense metamorphosed from the natural "Human" document to the deformed "Humument."

On this page, Mallock's original Victorian text is still visible and readable underneath Phillips's contemporary layer of paint, suggesting the spectral and lingering indelibility of the nineteenth-century source. More importantly, a new image—that of a female textual body—emerges from the commingling of past and present material. This image, which has no counterpart in Mallock's work, is emblematic of the neo-Victorian's creative consumption of the Victorian. By creating something new, the contemporary redeems itself from simple parasitic feeding on the original and secures *A Humument's* own unique identity. There are, then, two strands evident in Phillips's use of the Victorian text: communion and identity-formation. On the one hand, *A Humument's* cannibalism of *A Human Document* leads to communion between the two in the physical sense, as the works share one textual body. In fact, even Phillips's choice of name for his protagonist, Toge, which can only be derived from the words "together" and "altogether" in the original, speaks to the *togetherness* of the source material and the new work. On the other hand, Toge is also an entirely new character created from old material, a primary example of how the contemporary novel fashions a new separate identity through cannibalism. *A Humument* transforms the Victorian text into a distinctive contemporary product which, according to Marvin Sackner, "encompass[es] all of contemporary and modern art history." Such contemporary elements set the work firmly apart from its Victorian source. Indeed, in his use of *A Human Document*, Phillips may have created a new genre in *A Humument*, which has the reputation of being the first "treated" book that covers up a complete novel.¹²

The neo-Victorian as a whole can be seen as an extension of *A Humument* and the idea of the book-eating book: it is a cannibalistic genre that consumes the literary past for its own existence. The notion of cannibalism I have used to analyse Phillips's work can be applied to the understanding of the neo-Victorian genre as a whole: in the same way that *A Humument* has been living off *A Human Document*, neo-Victorian fiction generally can be seen as having been consuming and revising the same finite stock of nineteenth-century texts (or authors-

as-texts) since (and even before) the release of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This cannibalistic relationship is *fundamental* to the genre—it is not an option for neo-Victorian writers *not* to be cannibalistic.

Neo-Victorian works are carnivorous in their incorporation of past elements, and their authors have primarily looked to Victorian texts for sources of inspiration and expression. Their works are in one way or other “extracted” from the older novels. On the most basic level, neo-Victorian cannibalism takes the form of swallowing parts of nineteenth-century works more or less intact. One obvious example is the use of Victorian texts on the inside front and back covers and flyleaves, chapter epigraphs or, more integrally to the body of the novel, as quotations in the main text. The Victorian words, either as epigraphs or in-text citations, have been exhumed from their “natural” nineteenth-century body and incorporated into a “foreign” neo-Victorian one. More crucially, these contemporary novels incorporate the substance (as opposed to style) of nineteenth-century works, reusing and appropriating their authors, themes, plots, characters, and spatio-temporal settings.

And just like Phillips, who adapts and consumes *A Human Document* to describe “a situation, statement or thought” (Notes 2005), neo-Victorian writers rework earlier texts to articulate contemporary and sometimes personal concerns and anxieties. Neo-Victorian fiction also treats the Victorian in an ambivalent and aggressive manner similar to Phillips's treatment of *A Human Document*. These novels rely on the substance of their literary ancestors for nourishment and demonstrate a desire to emulate the accomplishments of their forebears. But this reliance and reverence is mediated by a desire for *original* expression and to form an identity separate from the *original* Victorian authors and texts (note the double meaning of “original”). Thus, the neo-Victorian evinces an on-going fascination with the Victorian age by openly appropriating its literary styles, plots, and techniques, while simultaneously seeking to express new and revisionist ideas by reconsidering Victorian traditions and ideologies through feminist, post-colonial, and social criticism and by presenting the stories of histori-

cally marginalised subjects: lesbians, madwomen, spiritualists, and those from the lower classes (such as prostitutes and convicts).

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NOTES

¹Margaret D. Stetz writes: "Many of these volumes, it seems, are being issued by the firm of Palgrave Macmillan, though Rodopi has just inaugurated its own 'Neo-Victorian Series,' under the editorship of Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben. Perhaps the coming years will see the major university presses—Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and others—welcoming this new area of study just as warmly" (345).

²In his introduction to in the fifth edition of the book, published in 2012, Phillips writes, "*A Humument* started life around noon on the 5th of November 1966; at a propitious place."

³According to Phillips, *A Humument* is a project that "last[s] a lifetime" (Introduction).

⁴Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's definition of the genre in *Neo-Victorianism* also stresses self-consciousness: "To be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss in this book, 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; emphasis original). Heilmann and Llewellyn believe that not "all fictions post-1901 that happen to have a Victorian setting or re-write a Victorian text or a Victorian character" are neo-Victorian. Instead, only "texts about the metahistoric and metacultural ramifications of such historical engagement" deserve the label (6). This definition is likely informed by the notion of "historiographic metafiction," a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to refer to fiction that consciously questions "the grounding of historical knowledge in the past" (92).

⁵See, for example, the "links" section on the website of the journal of *Neo-Victorian Studies* <<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/links.htm>>.

⁶Although he did not purposefully start out to revisit a Victorian text, Phillips does use the original story in his novel. He writes: "[*A Humument*] includes poems, music scores, parodies, notes on aesthetics, autobiography, concrete texts, romance, mild erotica, as well as the undertext of Mallock's original story" (Notes 2005). Phillips also reuses two characters from the Victorian book.

⁷See Gutleben.

⁸The interview with Tom Phillips was conducted by Gillian Partington and Adam Smyth (both of Birkbeck, University of London) on 16 September 2011 at a café in the South London Gallery. Partington and Smyth kindly shared with me the interview, and quotes from it are used here with permission from the interviewers.

⁹Phillips further explains: "I'm not supposed to cart in loads of stuff from other sources. [...] Sometimes I use postcards. They belong to me. Anything that belongs to me or that I have done I can reuse" (Interview). This admission that he only includes his belongings and creations in *A Humument* suggests a kind of communion between his text and Mallock's.

¹⁰For example, Phillips has also used Mallock's text for other artistic expressions, including an opera (see Notes 2005).

¹¹In the interview, Partington asks Phillips, "I was at a conference about book eating, in Cambridge. One of the speakers was talking about cannibalism and your work: she thought that *The Humument* was a kind of cannibalism." Phillips responds: "Yes, it [is] cannibalising something. That's true." (In this exchange, Partington is referring to a paper I presented entitled "Book-eating Books: Tom Phillips's *A Humument* and Neo-Victorian Fiction" at the "Eating Words: Text, Image, Food" conference on 13 September 2011.)

¹²However, *A Humument* does have predecessors, even though Phillips was unaware of them when he began his project. For example, the Biblical Harmonies produced at Little Gidding in the 1630s and 1640s, which are "lavish folio books constructed by cutting up printed texts of the four Gospels, and gluing the fragmented texts back into a new order" (Smyth), share striking similarities with Phillips's work. That said, Phillips's book is the most well-known contemporary example of such "treatment" of past texts and has even become the model for others, notably Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), which Foer created by cutting out portions of words from Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934). That Foer was inspired by *A Humument* seems clear as he visited Phillips to discuss *The Humument*. On the subsequent publication of *Tree of Codes*, Phillips expressed disappointment: "It's a bit painful because [...] he didn't half borrow from me!" (Interview).

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