Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository

Double/Cross: Erasure in Theory and Poetry

John Nyman
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Plug, Jan
The University of Western Ontario
Pero, Allan
The University of Western Ontario

Recommended Citation

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the implications of overt textual erasure on literary and philosophical meaning, especially with reference to the poststructuralist phenomenological tradition culminating in the work of Jacques Derrida. Responding both to the emergence of "erasure poetry" as a recognizable genre of experimental literature and to the relative paucity of serious scholarship on Derrida's "writing under erasure," I focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary and philosophical works in which visible evidence of erasure is an intended component of the finished (i.e., printed and disseminated) document. Erasure, I argue, performs a complex doubling or double/crossing of meaning according to two asymmetrically mobilized aspects of the text: textual thickness and responsibility. On one hand, erasure ensures that texts are doubled both within themselves and throughout their various contexts; thus, textual meaning is dispersed, branched, or thickened across multiple dimensions as texts are constituted in space and time. On the other hand, this sprawling, decentralized thickness is persistently juxtaposed with the fact of particular individuals' responsibility for the concrete texts they write. In the course of developing my argument, I analyze Martin Heidegger's striking out of "Being" in *The Question of Being*, Derrida's use of strikethroughs in his early philosophical works, John Cage and Jackson Mac Low's incorporation of erasure into their poetry of "chance operations," Jean-Luc Marion's negative theology, William S. Burroughs's cut-up method, Tom Phillips's erasure-based artist's book *A Humument*, and contemporary erasures including Ronald Johnson's *Radi*

os, M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, and Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*. I conclude by discussing some of my own creative explorations using the erasure technique.

Keywords

erasure, deconstruction, Derrida, experimental literature, appropriation, authorship

Acknowledgments

Thanks, first, to Jan Plug, my champion at the Theory Centre, for his boundless insight and generosity.

Thanks to Melanie Caldwell, everyone's champion at the Theory Centre, for her tireless attention and support.

Thanks to the students of the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism, my professors, my friends, and all others with whom I have shaped and shared the ideas behind this dissertation. Special thanks to Peter Schwenger for his enthusiasm and encouragement.

Thanks to Adrian Mioc, my secret hero, for providing me with room to live and think.

Thanks to the poetry communities of London, Guelph, and Toronto, for reminding me why I write.

Finally, thanks to the staff of McDonald's (Stone Road West and Gordon Street locations, Guelph) and the Toronto Public Library (Downsview branch) for maintaining the facilities in which the bulk of this dissertation was drafted.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Appendices

Note on the Text

Throughout this dissertation, I use a single strikethrough (like ~~this~~) to quote words rendered under erasure by their original authors. In several notable cases, however—including Martin Heidegger's "~~Being~~" in *The Question of Being* and Jacques Derrida's "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" in *Of Grammatalogy* (19)—erasure is indicated in the original publication not by a single strikethrough, but by an *X* printed over the word in question. This discrepancy is not an oversight on my part; rather, it is a consequence of one of my study's central claims regarding the relationship between erasure and textuality. A textual erasure is a sign, not a picture, and its representation should be amenable to various typical forms for the same reason that one hardly ever quotes using the same font in which the quoted text was originally printed. While I take seriously Jerome McGann's call for scholars to "attend […] to typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to 'poetry' or 'the text as such'" (13), I am also committed to Jacques Derrida's conclusion that a sign's iterability "supposes a minimal remainder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the *selfsame* be repeatable and identifiable *in*, *through*, and even *in view of* its alteration" (*Limited* 53). On a larger scale, striking this balance between the concrete materiality of writing and the enduring possibility of transcendental expression remains a persistent challenge across multiple dimensions of my research.

Introduction: (At Least) Two Erasures

Either there are two erasures, or there is no erasure at all.

In the first place, to erase means to "scrape out,"[1] not merely to partition or to cover up, and so an erasure indicates something that is no longer intact, complete, or available as such. In other words, an erasure proposes a pure omission; its goal or *telos* is the blankness or "null [*nul*]" substitute (de Biasi 23) in whose place something would no longer be anything. And while it is true that what has been ostensibly erased can often be recovered, the possibility of this recovery is not endemic to the erasure itself. Rather, to recover what has been erased only exposes the erasure's partiality; something may not have been "scraped out" everywhere or entirely, but the nature of its expulsion ensures that it cannot be "scraped in" or "unscraped." Otherwise, there has never been an erasure in its most basic sense.

Yet if there ever has been an erasure, there were always two, since something does take place precisely where something else is "scraped out." An erasure's "having taken place [*l'avoir-eu-lieu*]" (Rougé, "Rature" 14)[2] refers to its taking the place of what it erases only insofar as it also institutes the "definition of a place" (Rougé, "Ponctuation" 148) as something more than the merely formal corollary of plenitude or presence.

---

[1] From Latin *ērādĕre*, composed of *ē* ("out") and *rādĕre* ("to scrape," "to scratch" ["erase," *OED*]).
[2] Bertrand Rougé adapts this phrase from Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*, in which Jankélévitch uses it to define *le repentir* ("repentance," but also the corrections applied to a visual artwork in the course of drawing or painting [117-18]). When Rougé imports *l'avoir-eu-lieu* into his discussion of erasure (*la rature*), he extends its meaning to emphasize the idea of place (*lieu*) as a physical or material dimension ("Rature" 14)

Precisely insofar as it has been emptied of something else, the site of an erasure is something in and of itself. Moreover, this novel "something" comes neither from nowhere nor from what was scraped out of it. Rather, erasure's "taking place" comes out of a "scraping" that is inevitably correlated with the application—often violent, but always forceful—of power or agency. This second sense of erasure remains indissociable from the first, doubling it, as long as an erasure has in fact occurred.

The aim this dissertation is to elaborate erasure's doubleness as it manifests across written works of philosophy and literature. Specifically, I focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century writing in which visible evidence of textual erasure is an intended part of the published document. The results of my study, however, frequently bear on issues of ontology, ethics, and aesthetics with relevance beyond the scope of philosophical "writing under erasure" and literary "erasure poetry" in their narrowly defined, generic senses. I begin, for example, by examining the work of Martin Heidegger, whose "~~Being~~" introduced the overt writing of erasure to modern philosophy, and Jacques Derrida, who popularized erasure as a tactic of poststructuralist thought. For both of these thinkers, erasure is a critical means of interrupting the centuries-old project of proclaiming truth in a single voice, specifically by revealing how philosophical concepts are doubled into the concrete acts of writing by which they are recorded and disseminated. In the middle chapters of my thesis, I proceed by applying Heidegger's and Derrida's findings to some of the first modern literary erasurists—John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and William Burroughs—whose inclusions of overt erasures in poetic texts during the post-war decades pursued a different, though parallel goal. For these literary experimentalists,

erasure seemed to offer a way of diffusing (and defusing) the singular authority of the author figure; by replacing unique utterances with relatively uniform omissions—and the banalities left in their wake, such as blank paper, rough markings in pen and pencil, and the like—Cage, Mac Low, and Burroughs hoped to reconnect literature to a radically material foundation that would precede authorship itself. My final chapters, however, track how it was the failure of these earlier writers' attempts to eliminate authorial responsibility that seeded the rich plurality of contemporary literary erasures, including Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, Ronald Johnson's *Radi os*, M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, and Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*.

Throughout all of these instances, I argue, erasure's doubleness remains the critical factor behind its implications for philosophical and literary meaning. But in accordance with this point, my elaboration of these implications also takes place via a double argument. On one hand, I claim that erasure—both as a fact and as a possibility of writing—ensures that texts are doubled both within themselves and throughout their various contexts; thus, textual meaning is dispersed, branched, or thickened across multiple dimensions as texts are constituted in space and time. On the other hand, I argue that this sprawling, decentralized thickness is persistently juxtaposed with the fact of particular individuals' responsibility for the concrete texts they write. These two elements—thickness and responsibility—are not combined or balanced so much as they are asymmetrically mobilized in a given hermeneutic situation. In a general sense, their interactions inform the seemingly endless mystery and pleasure of a textuality that, as Derrida asserts, "no longer opposes writing to erasure" (*Limited* 137).

While my argument thus encompasses at least two theoretical dimensions (along with a plurality of literary dimensions), it begins with the double phenomenality of erasure's appearance in the world. Its guiding principle is consistent throughout: in the most concrete instances as well as the most abstract and complex, there are always (at least) two erasures.

Consider, for example, what is at stake when one refers to an 86-line poem by Guantánamo Bay inmate Mohamedou Ould Slahi, published in his *Guantánamo Diary* entirely redacted under black marks (359-61), as an erasure. In the first place, everything one would typically look for in a poem—its content, style, meaning, and so on—is rendered inaccessible or "opaque" (Voyce, "Reading"), as if the reader had simply failed to understand the poem's syntax or symbolism.[3] Yet the poem's appearance in Slahi's book is far from meaningless, since its erasure reveals what Larry Siems, the book's editor, calls the "*fingerprints*" of the American government's censorship of Slahi's memoir (Currier; qtd. in Voyce, "Reading"). While the "menacing effects of state censorship and surveillance" (Voyce, "Reading") conveyed by the black marks are not evoked by Slahi's poem taken on its own (since, even if Slahi's words reflect on these "menacing effects," the connection is entirely severed in the published edition of *Guantánamo Diary*), their manifestation is both conceptually and concretely indissociable from the poem's disappearance.

---

[3] Slahi himself suggests this comparison when he discusses being presented with poems written by his interrogator. Slahi writes that he "hardly understood" the interrogator's verses as a result of their surrealism (359), leading Stephen Voyce to compare Slahi's experience as a reader with our own experience encountering Slahi's poem fully redacted—even if Slahi's lines are "opaque in an altogether different sense" ("Reading").

Again, there can be no erasure in the second sense—as a perceptible irruption of agency—without an erasure in the first sense—as the undoing of a pre-given form. On one hand, the two erasures are each other's doubles or doppelgangers, as each manifests the same way concretely, but points in the direction of a different meaning. On the other hand, they are more than diffuse or diverse instances of a single unifying form; rather, each erasure interrupts, overrides, and reverses its counterpart's trajectory, the first reconstituting something as nothing, the second representing nothing as something. It is in this sense that the two erasures cross each other: they encounter each other against each other's intentions, oppose each other's ends, cut across each other's paths in an intersection or *X*, and even cancel or cross each other out. More specifically, erasure would constitute a double-cross,[4] exposing each of its faces to reversal by the other. When I suggest in the following, however, that erasure performs a double/cross or motivates its own double/crossing, my intent is to refer to both of these functions

---

[4] The term "double-cross" has been used only a few times with reference to erasure, or even in relation to the field of Derridean and deconstructive thought that structures my research more broadly. In reference to erasure writing specifically, Peter Schwenger briefly refers to Tom Phillips's work in *A Humument* as "an art of double exposure (and at times double cross)" (92; see chapter 4 for more on this quotation). Philip Monk's *Double-Cross: The Hollywood Films of Douglas Gordon* uses the term to refer to the "invisible non-place" where text and images cross over into each other, indicating both the doubleness and the duplicity of works in which the artistic effects of both media are played against each other (43); while Gordon's work does not employ or address explicitly textual erasures, the chiasmic encounters between forms, meanings, and intentions Monk describes are reflective of the themes discussed in my study. On the side of Derrida scholarship, John D. Caputo describes his method in "Cold Hermeneutics: Heidegger/Derrida" as a "double-cross: subverting Heidegger by means of Derrida, subverting Derrida by means of Heidegger" (*Radical* 198); while I have applied this structure of mutual subversion to many aspects of erasure, Caputo's use of the term mirrors mine in a broad sense. Finally, variations of doubling and duplicity can be found throughout Derrida's work, especially in *Dissemination* (which includes his discussions of the "*double mark*," "the rule according to which every concept necessarily receives two similar marks—a repetition without identity—one mark inside and the other outside the deconstructed system" [4]) and the "*double chiasmatic invagination of edges*" of "The Law of Genre" (238); while neither Derrida nor his commentators have used the term "double-cross" extensively in this regard, many have noted the close relationship between doubling in general and the structure of writing under erasure.

precisely according to the standard use of the slash: erasure doubles and/or crosses, and these actions may or may not be synonymous, depending on the purpose and scope according to which they are examined. In this way, the slash also indicates that erasure's twin functions are not—or at least not necessarily—simultaneous or consubstantial. Rather, erasure is more frequently bound up in asymmetrical power relations, as in Slahi's case, or at least unequally distributed across space and time.

While it would be nearly impossible to provide a comprehensive list of philosophical thinkers who comment on erasure in an abstract or conceptual sense, very few employ textual erasures concretely, and it has not been difficult to focus my project on the most important of these: Heidegger (covered in chapter 1), Derrida (covered in chapter 2), and Jean-Luc Marion (covered in chapter 3). Locating textual erasure within the modern literary tradition, however, poses a very different challenge. As with many of the artistic forms and techniques that emerged in the work of the modern avant-garde, no single point of origin can be attributed to the genre of literary writing usually known as "erasure poetry" or simply "erasure."[5] While there are currently many published works

---

[5] Although references to "erasure poetry" appear very rarely in academic texts, a variety of articles covering the genre have been published in recent years, often in magazines and on websites whose readers and contributors include prominent contemporary scholars. These commentaries are largely in agreement regarding both the technical specifications of the genre and its central canonical examples, and at least one writer (King) has proposed the term "erasurist" to describe a practitioner of the art form (a convention that I also follow). Most significant for my purposes is the fact that a growing number of contemporary writers are familiar with the definition of the genre and its traditional compositional strategies, and this knowledge will likely spread amongst audiences as new generations of writers produce works according to this model. At the same time, the specifics of what constitutes "erasure poetry," and even the genre's proper name, remain somewhat contentious. Most notably, "blackout poetry," popularized by Austin Kleon's *Newspaper Blackout*, describes a form of appropriation-based writing using essentially the same guidelines; while the term "erasure" is more often recognized in literary and academic circles, "blackout poetry" is more popular among amateur practitioners on social media platforms such as Instagram. Small but perhaps not insignificant differences between these and other proposed categorizations of the work (such as, for

meeting the genre's most commonly accepted criteria—that is, that an erasure is a written work composed by selectively eliminating or obscuring material components (e.g., letters, punctuation, words, or larger units such as sentences and paragraphs) of a (usually) single larger work—for many years only two modern works meeting these criteria, Phillips's *A Humument* and Johnson's *Radi os*, were well-known. Yet Phillips's and Johnson's methodology did not by any means emerge in isolation, and there is little evidence to suggest that "erasure poetry" was recognized as having even a nominal autonomy from other experimental writing techniques until its resurgence in the early 2000s. During the 1960s and 1970s, the range of practices in which Phillips's and Johnson's technique can be situated was far-reaching and nearly impossible to delimit, including efforts in disciplines beyond the scope both of this study and of my own expertise.

Although I will not be covering them in extensive detail, developments in the fine arts are likely the most important non-literary influences of the first and subsequent erasure poets. In the post-war era, for example, figures such as Robert Rauschenberg (in his 1953 *Erased de Kooning Drawing*) and Jasper Johns (by crossing out his signature in works such as *Untitled (Skull)*, and through other uses of the "X" mark during the early 1970s)[6] used visual erasures to explore questions of citationality and compromised authorship, especially in response to the high modernism of the previous generation's

---

example, the literal contrast between erasure poetry's emphasis on white space and blackout poetry's black ink redactions) may be worthy of further study.

[6] See Fred Orton's "On ~~Being~~ Bent 'Blue'" especially on Johns and writing or painting *sous rature* (as Derrida might put it).

abstract expressionists. Explicitly textual erasures have been exhibited by many

contemporary artists (of whom Jenny Holzer is perhaps the most important) as fine art

objects, and Doris Cross's mid-60s erasures of dictionary pages (which were also

produced in a fine arts context) have recently been proposed as the earliest modern

examples of the erasure genre (Xu). Yet by broadening our understanding of the

discourses involved in erasure only slightly, we can also recognize that the development

of erasure poetry parallels a much more thorough exploration of some of its central

themes in several major post-war art movements, including conceptual art, appropriation

art, the forms of culture jamming practiced by the Situationist International and its

successors, and the mixed media practices of the Fluxus group. These links further extend

erasure's influences back in time to the collaboration and collage practices of pre-war and

inter-war European avant-gardes, as well as laterally to post-war innovations in non-

artistic disciplines and Western culture in general.

In a more strictly literary sphere, erasure's precursors can be roughly grouped into

two distinct (though intertwined) technical traditions.[7] First, even a superficial glance at a

typical work of erasure poetry reveals the genre's indebtedness to the exploration of

---

[7] The relatively condensed genealogy presented here invites comparison with Perloff's genealogy of the contemporary avant-garde in the introduction to her *Unoriginal Genius*; although Perloff explanation approaches a more contemporary (1990s to present) Conceptualist or "citational or intertextual poetics" (*Unoriginal* 17), her focus includes many of the same literary techniques and histories as those of erasure poetry (in fact, she often refers to Srikanth Reddy's 2011 erasure *Voyager* as an example of the movement she studies, for example in "John Cage as Conceptualist Poet" [20]). As I do below, Perloff identifies the importance of the insistence, exemplified by concrete poetry, "that the verbal cannot be separated from its material representation and vice versa" (*Unoriginal* 14). Although her second emphasis on the influence of the poetics of translation (Perloff, *Unoriginal* 17) aligns less perfectly with the themes I present here (indeed, many of its developments came later than the period I explore in this chapter), linguistic translation's significant degree of overlap with Joyce's and especially Pound's aesthetics (both of which I highlight below) should be noted.

literature's visual and material aspects primarily owed, at least in the modern Western

tradition, to Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 poem-pamphlet *Un Coup de Dés Jamais*

n'Abolira le Hasard (*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*). Although writers

have engaged with the visual characteristics of written language since ancient times,

Mallarmé is often regarded as being among the first since the modern normalization of

printing to consider the poetic implications of typography, the formal characteristics of

the book and the page, and (especially in *Un Coup de Dés*) the use of negative or white

space. Marcel Broodthaers's 1969 reproduction of the publication, in which Mallarmé's

text is replaced by shaded rectangle of the same sizes and in the same positions as the

original printed words (Gilbert, *Reprint* 94-98), brilliantly summarizes the key point that

writers throughout the twentieth century extracted from Mallarmé's approach: from the

typographical experimentalists of Italian and Russian Futurism to the international

practitioners of post-war and contemporary concrete poetry, Mallarmé's descendents

repeatedly demonstrate both that writing's visual and material manifestation is

inseparable from its communicative function or sense, and that a writer's attitude toward

this manifestation can have a decisive impact on the literary value of that writer's work.

     Second, the prominence given to the appropriation of pre-existing or found texts

in erasure poetry carries forward several early-twentieth-century modernist writers'

unique attitude toward the role of citation—both of canonical works and the language of

everyday life—in literary writing. Two versions of this attitude, both of which exerted a

significant influence on the writers who followed their lead, can be found in the work of

Ezra Pound and James Joyce: while Pound's *Cantos* are underpinned by a dense and

wide-ranging network of allusions, echoes, and direct quotations of classical literary works in Western and non-Western languages, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* essentially abandons direct linear storytelling to instead foreground a collage of phrases, words, and noises sourced from both high literature and vernacular culture. Although these authors differed greatly in their intentions, their compositional strategies, and the expectations they placed on their readers, they collectively established that the compilation and collage of others' words and ideas is not only a legitimate literary strategy, but also an immensely fruitful one. Instead of being largely reducible to homage or inheritance (as was the case with the Romantics' rejuvenation of classical texts) or relegated to the more dubious history of literary plagiarism, appropriation thus became a formidable ally in the modernists' quest to "make it new," as Pound put it. Additionally, the move from using quotations as epigraphs or illustrations framed by ostensibly original writing to composing passages made up almost entirely of quoted material dramatically changed subsequent authors' sense of what the literal work of writing could entail. At this level especially, Pound's and Joyce's uses of appropriation linked up with the tradition of viewing language in material terms to allow erasure to appear as a viable means of artistic creation within the literary tradition.

Both Mallarmé's innovations and those of Pound and Joyce had the overall goal of imbuing writing with a greater plurality—of mediums, of voices, of meanings, of interpretations, and so on—and this orientation is carried forward in the broad range of

literary and philosophical[8] writing they influenced. While erasure manifests through the

structure of the double/cross, its meanings are therefore not limited to two. In "Reading

the Redacted," to return to an earlier example, Stephen Voyce quickly abandons the

simple duality exhibited by Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* in order to emphasize "an

emergent poetics that counter-inscribes the redacted page and its pernicious cultural

logics"; this is to say that Voyce has already identified a poetics that erases (the cultural

logic of) erasure, concretely replicating erasure's twofold manifestation while

simultaneously implying a(nother) crucial contextual shift. Jenny Holzer's *Redaction*

Paintings, for example, which feature U.S. government memoranda about the Iraq War

overlaid with blocks of black ink, highlight at least[9] three moments in the production of

meaning: the original, undoctored acts of communication between high-ranking officials;

the emptying out of that content by government censors; and Holzer's re-presentation of

the censoring marks under her own name and as fine art. Compared to literary visuality

(in the style of Mallarmé) and citationality (in the style of Pound or Joyce), the very

notion of a "counter-inscription" (where inscription already implies the opposition

between medium and mark) suggests that erasure's plurality constitutes a special case:

specifically, the series of erasure's double/crosses would be "indefinite" in the Kantian

sense outlined by Jean-François Lyotard. In an indefinite series, every attempt to close

---

[8] Derrida was in fact influenced by Joyce early in the former's career, as is demonstrated by his critical juxtaposition of Joyce's "equivocation" against Edmund Husserl's "univocity" in his *Introduction* to Husserl's "The Origin of Geometry" (*Edmund Hussserl's* 104).

[9] One may add further levels of meaning to either end of this list: for example, the "facts on the ground" in Iraq were in many cases substantially different from the information disseminated in government memos, and the meaning received by the reader at any point could differ from the intentions of any of the text's contributors.

the series via a definitive judgment immediately extends the series by becoming part of it

(Lyotard 8). Analogously, to attempt to limit the scope of an erasure—for example, via a

"counter-inscription"—is to erase it, which at once broadens its scope. A series of

erasures is thus "neither finite nor infinite" (Lyotard 8), since it is never fully closed, yet

extends only as far as its interpreters have invented meanings for the texts it has

produced.

Throughout the following chapters, I use the notion of thickening or thickness to

indicate the indefinite pluralization of meaning that results from erasure's concrete

manifestation in written works. In the poststructuralist tradition, this terminology is most

often attributed to Clifford Geertz, who developed Gilbert Ryle's "thick description" into

a method of anthropological research based on the idea that, in matters of culture,

"[c]omplexities are possible, if not practically without end, at least logically so" (7).

However, while Geertz draws some parallels between his ethnographic methodology and

literary textual analysis,[10] my understanding of textual thickness is far more indebted to

Jerome McGann's *The Textual Condition*, which explicitly locates the thickness of

Geertz's cultural meanings in the material "self-embodiment" of written works (14).

According to McGann, all texts are imbricated with, or even constituted by, "material

negotiations" (3), meaning that the phenomenal conditions of a text's physical medium,

institutional dissemination, and societal reception are as integral to its capacity to be

"read" as its symbolic references. All texts "vary from themselves […] as soon as they

---

[10] For instance, Geertz suggests that "[d]oing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries" (10).

engage with the readers they anticipate," since those readers' unique material conditions shape the plurality of readings that ultimately constitute the text as such (McGann 9-10). Yet erasures (and erasures of erasures, and so on) intensify this variance indefinitely, since each embeds several readings—and the material conditions of those readings—within the document they take part in concretely presenting to the reader. While it remains rooted in McGann's "textual condition," erasure thus exhibits greater nuance than McGann captures in his distinction between writing and reading. In turn, erasure may be better served by N. Katherine Hayles's broader definition of "materiality" as "the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies" ("Print" 72)—that is, as long as "physical characteristics" and "signifying strategies" host their own pluralities of interpretive trajectories. In any case, thickness indicates a spatio-temporal elaboration of meaning that is not only formally complex, but also concretely so, extending indefinitely across the multiple dimensions of production, distribution, apprehension, and reflection that are continually made manifest as erasure "takes place."

Yet even if erasure is, in this sense, always plural, the indefinite extension of a series of erasures cannot render any single erasure completely trivial; in other words, the thickness of a text across meanings does not negate the significance of writers' and readers' responsibility for the particular meanings that arise. This eventuality is clarified by Lyotard's elaboration of the kind of signifying gesture or "phrase" that could contribute to an indefinite series, which he calls a "reversible" phrase or "*antistrephon*" (8). An *antistrephon* is "reversible" because it is not only bidirectional (in that it could either close the series to which it is affixed by folding back against it or extend the series

by counting itself as an additional element) but also because it takes up only one direction at a time, leaving the other an "unactualized" possibility (at least temporarily [Lyotard xii]). Whichever direction the phrase takes up at any given moment is arbitrary, in the sense of its being decided by an arbiter or external authority. Moreover, as Lyotard demonstrates both through his classical example of an *antistrephon*[11] and with the legal and ethical examples he foregrounds throughout *The Differend*, the arbiter's decision often generates substantial material, economic, or ethical consequences. While the field of possible meanings tends to thicken or pluralize itself, an individual's responsibility for particular meanings therefore gives rise to narrower and more linear relationships between textuality and the extra-textual world.

If the thickness of a text is the first consequence of textual erasure, the fact of someone's or something's responsibility for a text is the second. When I refer to this responsibility throughout the remainder of my dissertation, I do not intend to invoke a set of standards or ideals according to which an action could be judged (as in, for example, the notion of responsible behaviour or practices). Rather, responsibility in writing under erasure is the condition of action; it is always responsibility *for*, along with the

---

[11] Lyotard's example is rooted in a contest between Protagoras and his pupil Euathlus (Lyotard 6). Euathlus contends that, as he has not won a contest with his master up to the present moment, he should not have to pay Protagoras's tutoring fee. In developing this conclusion, Euathlus isolates the contest at hand from the series of all contests between him and Protagoras "up to now," effectively closing the series and placing the "now" of his own argument beyond it. But Protagoras takes the opposite view: in his opinion, the contest in which they are currently engaged must be included in the series of all contests "up to now"; therefore, if Euathlus's argument is successful, Euathlus has in fact won at least one contest (the one happening "now") and must pay the fee. The implications of an erasure can be understood through an analogous structure. Like the terms of Protagoras and Euathlus's wager, an erasure (understood specifically as a legible or implied signifier presented in conjunction with markings indicating its redaction) waffles over its inclusion or exclusion from the discourse it inaugurates, since it can be read either as its own omission from that discourse or as the reconstitution of that discourse according to the external source of the censorship.

implications of accountability, causality, and authorship that emerge in its wake.[12]

Thickness and responsibility are intertwined, yet each works to counteract the other's understanding and activation of textual meaning; in a certain sense, then, they can be understood as each other's "reversible" phrases. Erasure thus stages the intersection of thickness and responsibility as distinct discursive genres whose difference cannot be mediated. Attempting to hold to both at once can bring no true resolution, which leaves only two ways to proceed: either make an arbitrary decision to privilege one over the other, or defer the decision and extend their double/crossing through space and time.[13] Nonetheless, one may see such a double/crossing—of thickness and responsibility, but also of philosophical writing under erasure and erasure poetry—as my study's fundamental aim.

My project is not a survey, and it does not seek to exhaustively document either the history or the present state of erasure writing as a genre. Rather, I seek to use the principles of the double/cross, thickness, and responsibility to draw a theoretical line— however indirect or provisional—between the development of textual erasure as a communicative strategy in philosophical writing and its growing importance to the field of experimental visual literature. In this pursuit, I focus on the ways in which erasure

---

[12] On this point I part with the majority of commentators who have discussed the notion of responsibility in Derrida's work, including Nicole Anderson, who discusses responsibility extensively in *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure*. Taking their cues mostly from Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, these commentators understand responsibility to be inherently connected to the notion of response, often concluding that, due to the impossibility of responding completely to the nature of the other, responsibility is inevitably mixed with irresponsibility. These conclusions, however, fail to address a form of responsibility that does not take "irresponsibility" as its antonym, as I do in my study; while someone or something may be more or less responsible for an event or consequence, it cannot be said that they were "irresponsible for" it.

[13] Such is the case in the dispute between Protagoras and Euathlus, at least according to Aulus-Gellius's telling, which ends when "[t]he judges decide to put off their pronouncement until later" (Lyotard 8).

poetry and Derrida's writing under erasure come to express an inevitable affiliation, tying them to a well-rehearsed corpus of poststructuralist aesthetics, politics, and thought that remains both contentious and influential today. Chapter 1, "Double/Crossing Differential Ontology: Heidegger and Deleuze on the Question of '~~Being~~,'" inaugurates my investigation by returning to the origins of modern philosophical erasure in Heidegger's *The Question of Being*, specifically in light of Gilles Deleuze's critique of the technique in *Difference and Repetition*. While Heidegger's and Deleuze's textual representations of "Being" each expose and correct the flaws of the other, Heidegger's "~~Being~~" in particular emphasizes the incorporation of its own writing into a thickened history of differential ontology, one that "takes place" not only as the general truth of Being, but also as a philosophical discourse constituted by concrete texts. In chapter 2, "Derrida's '*tour d'écriture*': Erasure, *Paleonymy*, and Responsibility," I trace Derrida's expansion of Heidegger's use of the strikethrough in his own philosophical writings, first by exploring the nuances of textual thickness in Derrida's concrete erasures, and then by considering the implications of Derrida's *paleonymy*, in which *paleonyms* or "old names" are retained under erasure (both concretely and figuratively) in the course of developing new concepts. In this latter investigation, I argue that the *paleonym* represents a "power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21) that contrasts with, while also adhering to, the mutability of signifiers described by Derrida in texts such as *Limited Inc*. Ultimately, this "power of *communication*" underlies the responsibility inherent to any erasure and to any writing defined by its erasability. While Derrida initially identifies the "radical responsibility" exhibited by Edmund Husserl in his affirmation of transcendental

phenomenology (*Edmund Husserl's* 141), I conclude that responsibility emerges as a

quality of all texts—philosophical, literary, and otherwise—insofar as they can be

situated in a concrete history of transcendental expression, and that writing under erasure

in particular emphasizes this inevitability.

Chapter 3, "Responsible for 'Nothing': Cage's and Mac Low's Proto-erasures as

Negative Theology," acts as a juncture in my dissertation in that it explores some of the

most explicit encounters between Derrida's poststructuralist philosophical milieu and the

post-war proto-erasure poetry that eventually emerged out of Pound's and Joyce's literary

experiments. For John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, whose incorporation of erasure into

chance-based literary appropriations constitutes the focus of this chapter, reimagining

literature's form as a concrete object and disrupting the convention of expressing oneself

in "one's own words"[14] amounted to much the same thing, establishing the technical

basis of an ideological movement against the privilege of literary authority that continues

to this day. Critics often link Cage and Mac Low's pursuit of "non-egoic" literature—in

which evidence of the author's intention and authority would be minimal or non-

existent—to Roland Barthes' landmark poststructuralist essay "The Death of the Author"

and, through Barthes, to Derrida's poststructuralist philosophy of language. Against this

narrative, I set out to establish Cage and Mac Low's approach to literature as a form of

negative theology, and then to distinguish the latter from the more nuanced

performativity of Derridean writing, specifically by tracing Derrida's critique of Marion

[14] This phrase is given special attention in Marjorie Perloff's "Towards a conceptual lyric," which praises the twenty-first-century Conceptual writers whose eschewal of original authorship can be seen (especially in light of Perloff's larger body of criticism) as a descendant of Cage and Mac Low's innovations.

and his negative theological erasure, "~~God~~." While Cage and Mac Low's challenge to the conventional dominance of the author figure in literary writing, and the formally experimental means by which they launched that challenge, were foundational to the development of erasure poetry, their failures to achieve a "non-egoic" artwork demonstrate the need for later erasurists to pursue more multi-dimensional portrayals of their own responsibility for the texts they produce.

With Heidegger's and Derrida's theoretical developments of erasure firmly in tow, chapters 4 and 5 explore the plurality of ways in which double/crossing manifests in erasure writing approaching the contemporary period. Chapter 4, "Asymmetrical Collaboration: From the Cut-up to Erasure," begins with Deleuze and Félix Guattari's condemnation of William Burroughs's cut-ups (whose subtractive, appropriation-based method acts an important precedent of erasure poetry) as a "radicale-system" or false multiplicity (*Thousand* 6), but concludes that Burroughs's failures were corrected by Tom Phillips's development of his method in *A Humument*, one of the first projects (and probably the most influential) to employ erasure writing as it is recognized today. While *A Humument* uses erasure to thicken both its own meaning and that of its source text, W. H. Mallock's relatively unknown nineteenth-century novel *A Human Document*, across many dimensions of meaning, its overall literary innovation is its willingness to replicate, adapt, parody, and diverge from Mallock's text across various interpretive moments, which allows it to constitute a genuine multiplicity rather than an obstinate insistence on difference for its own sake. Chapter 5, "Crossings: Contemporary Erasure Poetries," approaches the contemporary genre of erasure poetry by first discussing Ronald

Johnson's 1977 long poem *Radi os*, then exploring the use of erasure in a selection of more recent works, especially M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* Specifically, I focus on the distinction between erasures that appropriate generally respected canonical works of literature—including *Radi os*, Jen Bervin's *Nets*, and Janet Holmes's *The Ms of My Kin*, which treat John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, William Shakespeare's sonnets, and Emily Dickinson's collected poems, respectively—and those that target little-known, non-literary, and in important ways reprehensible historical texts—including Philip's treatment of the case summary for *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the trial that resulted from the 1781 *Zong* massacre of African slaves en route to Jamaica, and Jordan Abel's erasures of Marius Barbeau's ethnographic study *Totem Poles*.

Finally, in my conclusion, I propose that both the theoretical structure of erasure's double/cross and the actual plurality of strategies employed by erasure-based works makes any attempt to define fixed characteristics of the genre, or even to fix it as a genre at all, futile. Thus, in lieu of a conclusive theory of erasure, I discuss how two of my own creative engagements with the technique attempt to push the limits of some of its most divergent possibilities.

Because my project is not a survey, I have limited my discussion of contemporary erasure poetry to a small selection of authors whose works fit well with my insights, my experiences, and the existing critical literature. An immense variety of erasure poetry has been written in recent decades, and it should be understood that my relatively narrow lens does not constitute a restrictive endorsement of the works I have chosen to single out. Similarly, I have had to omit discussions of many of the historical writers whose work

could be counted among the influences of contemporary erasure poetry, although it may

be helpful for the purposes of defining my scope and intent to mention some of them

here. To start, the most significant writers I have omitted are probably Jonathan Williams

and Thomas A. Clark, both of whom used techniques fitting the criteria of erasure but did

not pursue its aesthetic potential to the extent of Phillips or Johnson.[15] Armand

Schwerner's *Tablets* is another regrettable omission, since, although its ostensible source

text is invented rather than appropriated, its presentation highlights many of the aesthetic

effects exploited by erasure poetry.[16] More broadly, my investigation also does not

explicitly address works in the vein of Marcel Duchamp's "SURcenSURE"—which

simulates the censoring effect of erasure without an actual or available source text—

Robert Brown's *Gems: A Censored Anthology*—which functions more strictly as satire

than an attempt to forge new literary texts—or the writings of Oulipo (*Ouvroir de*

littérature potentielle)—whose participants pioneered the use of systematic constraint-

based techniques for literary writing, but were not intensely concerned with how source

texts were to be selected or engaged. Finally, my investigation omits the work of post-war

writers, such as Kathy Acker, who significantly developed the techniques, aesthetics, and

themes of erasure poetry's predecessors (often in radically different ways from the

authors highlighted in my study) without employing techniques of erasure more strictly

---

[15] See Ross Hair's *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry* (134-137) for a detailed discussion of the influence of Williams's "Excavations from the Case-Histories of Havelock Ellis" and Clark's *Some Particulars* on Johnson's erasure poetics. Briefly, Johnson (and, earlier, Phillips) combined aesthetic strategies from both poets' erasure methods: Williams's work retains the spacing and arrangement of words in his source texts but rarely reinvents the syntactical structure of their prose, while Clark fragments and restructures his source text considerably but abandons its visual organization in favour of left-aligned verse.

[16] Travis Macdonald's "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics" especially highlights Schwerner's contribution to the genre.

defined.

As a final note, it should also be understood that my project is not primarily concerned with tracing concrete historical connections between the early innovators of English-language erasure poetry and largely (especially at the time) continental developments in philosophical writing and thought. Although such connections exist, they are few, and based on the evidence available it is difficult to evaluate their significance. More important to my study are the overlapping themes and methods that manifest across these disciplines and their texts, regardless of whether this overlap is the product of direct influence or, as Craig Dworkin puts it in *Reading the Illegible*, the "unrecorded nexuses, unacknowledged affiliations, and unspoken conversations" that are always "in the air" in any historical period (137). Beyond the importance of Dworkin's *Zeitgeist*, however, I also contend that a certain form of concrete historical connection between philosophical and literary erasure exists in abundance—it's just that this connection could not be called "historical" from the perspective of its twentieth-century participants, but only from our own perspective as twenty-first-century critics whose writings have established the connection retroactively. My contention could in this sense be seen as aligning with Michel Foucault's "history of the present" (*Discipline* 31) or Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, in which history is always "filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (261). Even if Derrida's writing under erasure only joins hands with Phillips's *A Humument* by way of a trans-temporal network of associations their authors could not have foreseen at their respective moments of composition, the fact that such associations do "take place" in recent criticism means that the connection, from

our present standpoint, is no less concrete as a result. If, then, my characterizations of strictly literary projects sometimes feature applications or reapplications of philosophical topics originating in different times and for different purposes, these should not be seen only as illustrative supplements to the discussions that frame them, but as integral participants in the associative series that constitute erasure's history today.

Chapter 1

Double/Crossing Differential Ontology: Heidegger and Deleuze on the

Question of "~~Being~~"

Immediately after explicating one of *Difference and Repetition*'s key theses—that "being is difference itself […,] the being of the problematic, the being of problem and question" (64)—Gilles Deleuze interrupts his argument with an astonishingly brief gloss on a Heideggerian formulation uncannily close to his own: "~~Being~~." The reference appears at the culmination of Deleuze's "Note on Heidegger's Philosophy of Difference," a section that is itself singular. Here, in the span of only two pages, Deleuze reduces Heidegger's philosophy to a series of concise, densely cited positions and approves of Heidegger's recurring rebuke of his (mis)interpreters, affirming that "the Heideggerian *Not* refers not to the negative in Being but to Being as difference; it refers not to negation but to questioning" (*Difference* 64). This statement essentially aligns Deleuze's and Heidegger's ontological trajectories, since both of them, Deleuze concludes, aim to free Being from its traditional subordination to identity by instead interpreting it in terms of a primordial difference irreducible to simple negation or non-identity.

Yet Deleuze's apparent wedding of Heidegger's philosophy to his own is revoked even more quickly than it is established. Referring to the many commentators who have misunderstood Heidegger's Being as an adjunct of negation, Deleuze writes that "[i]t can nevertheless be asked whether Heidegger did not himself encourage the

misunderstandings, by his conception of 'Nothing' as well as by his manner of 'striking

through' Being" (*Difference* 66). Deleuze's repudiation of Heidegger's erasure, moreover,

is far from trivial, as it precipitates the entire unravelling of the latter's purported

commitment to differential ontology: by the end of the paragraph in which the reference

to "~~Being~~" first appears, Deleuze concludes that Heidegger did not conceive of Being in a

manner that would truly disengage it from identity (*Difference* 66). As Janae Sholtz

observes in her study of the two thinkers, "Deleuze reads Heidegger as a companion on a

particular journey, but one who had just veered off the path too soon" (2). However,

Deleuze and Félix Guattari's criticisms of Heidegger in *What Is Philosophy?* (94-111)

suggest that Deleuze ultimately saw this "veer[ing] off" as the prelude to a substantial

and serious departure. In any case, much seems to depend on Heidegger's gesture of

"striking through" in just one of his essays,[1] and not even one of his most widely read or

critically acknowledged.[2]

---

[1] Although Heidegger writes "~~Being~~," with the strikethrough included in his printed text, only in the *The Question of Being* (1956), he first mentions the notion of "cros[sing] out" a word in the 1929-30 lecture course published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (198). Interestingly, the role played by the gesture in this early text is very different from its role in *The Question of Being*, in which it is both concretized and developed much more fully. While *The Question of Being* presents "~~Being~~" as a more advanced or preferable means of representing Being in its relationship with humanity, in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* Heidegger recommends that a word should be crossed out to show that non-human animals are "poor in world" compared to human subjects: the word "rock," for example, in relation to the lizard that lies on it, should be crossed out "in order to indicate that whatever the lizard is lying on is certainly given *in some way* for the lizard, and yet is not known to the lizard *as* a rock" or "is not accessible [to the lizard] *as a being*" (Heidegger, *Fundamental* 198). While Heidegger's thinking on the subject of crossing out words clearly shifted between *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* and *The Question of Being*, since in the latter case the crossed out word "~~Being~~" represents the philosopher's enriched engagement with Being rather than the animal's "po[verty] of world," the former text's related assertion that the animal "*both has and does not have world*" (199) presents an interesting comparison with the way in which "~~Being~~" in *The Question of Being* refers conceptually to both "Being" and "oblivion," and textually to both the identity of Being and Being as difference, as discussed below.

[2] *The Question of Being* is generally considered a minor work within Heidegger's corpus, and it is infrequently mentioned by Heidegger scholars. Moreover, when scholars do mention the essay, they often

While Deleuze's "Note on Heidegger's Philosophy of Difference" is barely

perceptible against the enormity of *Difference and Repetition*'s philosophical vision,

along with being practically invisible to Heidegger scholars, I have chosen to foreground

it here, at the beginning of my dissertation, because it represents a pivotal moment in the

modern history of textual erasure. Especially in conjunction with Deleuze and Guattari's

later critique of William Burroughs's cut-up method (*Thousand* 6)—where Burroughs, as

I discuss in chapter 4, can be seen as a central figure in the tradition of appropriation-

based experimental writing from which contemporary erasure poetry emerged—

Difference and Repetition's rejection of Heidegger's "~~Being~~" seems to exemplify

Deleuze's broader, career-spanning opposition to the fascination with reduction,

introspection, and so-called negativity that is often said to characterize both erasure

poetry and the deconstructive tradition of Jacques Derrida's writing under erasure.[3]

Despite this, I do not intend to challenge Deleuze's critique head-on. Rather, I have

turned to Deleuze's engagement with Heidegger's "~~Being~~" in order to demonstrate that

Difference and Repetition has more in common with erasure than Deleuze may have

believed, and that this commonality speaks volumes about erasure's significance to

ontology, philosophical discourse, and writing in general. Picking up on these themes, the

---

leave out any reference to "~~Being~~." Overall, the critical literature suggests that Heidegger's "~~Being~~" is of much greater interest to scholars analyzing the origins of Derrida's writing "under erasure" ("*sous rature*") than it is to interpreters of Heidegger's thought, making Deleuze's emphasis on the gesture even more remarkable.

[3] This perception is perhaps strongest in Gordon C. F. Bearn's "Differentiating Derrida and Deleuze," which begins by stating that the difference between the two philosophers' works "is the difference between a philosophy trapped in the frame of representation and one which breaks on through (to the other side). It is the difference between playing a Derridean game you can never win and a Deleuzian game you can never loose [sic]. It is the difference between No and Yes" (441).

latter half of my chapter goes on to elaborate how Heidegger's "~~Being~~" inaugurated a new means of entwining the transcendental being of philosophical thought with the historical, concrete being of philosophical writing. Ultimately, it was this gesture that set the stage for the double/crossing of expression and materiality that most defines modern erasure throughout its theoretical and poetic applications today.

By retreading Deleuze's critique from the perspective of Heideggerian erasure, I argue that erasure is indissociable from the elaborations and complications of differential ontology in Deleuze's work. Erasure, then, is integral to differential ontology insofar as differential ontology has a history—that is, insofar as it has a lineage and a tradition within modern philosophical literature. First, I suggest that Deleuze's critique of Heidegger and, ultimately, the methodological foundations of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* betray what Paul de Man calls a critical blindness, since Deleuze's methodology contradicts his text's principles in a way that is nonetheless essential to his pursuit of difference in itself. This affirms, in turn, that Deleuze's argumentation takes the form of a double/cross well modeled by "~~Being~~," since Heidegger's erasure assembles both the representational identity of Being Deleuze seeks to reject and the material trace of that rejection. "~~Being~~," then, neither fulfills Deleuze's desire to abandon representation nor cures differential ontology of its inherent blindness, but instead pluralizes the dimensions in and across which the insolubility of these problems manifests. More significantly, Heidegger's erasure constitutes the material history of philosophical writing's approach to difference in itself, taking up ontology's origins in the ontology of identity while extending them in the direction of difference. In other words, the textual

dimensions of both "~~Being~~" and *The Question of Being* become the thickness of

differential ontology insofar as the tradition of writing and speaking about Being is

concretely lived across time and space.

* * *

Although I cannot propose a finally adequate correction to the text of *Difference*

and Repetition, it is crucial to acknowledge that the decisive moment in Deleuze's

critique of Heidegger's philosophy of difference—that is, when Deleuze suggests

Heidegger's use of erasure "encourage[s…] misunderstandings" of the proper

characterization of being (*Difference* 66)—involves a performative contradiction that

compromises its adherence to the principles Deleuze sets for his own ontology. Most

basically, the extent to which Deleuze's statements constitute a comparative judgment of

Heidegger's philosophy contradicts Deleuze's argument that a philosophy modelled on

judgment is fundamentally inadequate to difference. Deleuze's critique of judgment is

based on the idea that judgment subordinates difference to the identity of the concept by

means of analogy:[4] since judgment means determining a given thing's likeness to an

underlying concept or standard, ontological judgment imagines Being as a conceptual

---

[4] As Deleuze states, "the analogy of judgment allows the identity of a concept to subsist, either in implicit and confused form or in virtual form," since analogy is "itself the analogue of identity within judgment" (*Difference* 33). See also Deleuze's "To Have Done With Judgment."

identity for which the differences between beings are secondary. Nonetheless, Deleuze's critique of Heidegger is precisely such a judgement, since Deleuze's point is that Heidegger's formulation of Being, "~~Being~~," is less like the true nature of Being than Deleuze's. At the very least, this means that Deleuze's critique of Heidegger, by Deleuze's own standards, cannot participate in differential ontology as such—that is, insofar as a differential ontology "as such" could in fact "be."

Once these questions are raised, it becomes impossible to isolate the other numerous exercises of judgment that should, by *Difference and Repetition*'s own prescription, be kept at the peripheries of Deleuze's ontology. Deleuze's superficial judgement of Heidegger's philosophy as inadequate is in fact based on a set of linguistic judgments whose fields of operation are much wider. These are Deleuze's and Heidegger's respective decisions regarding how to best represent Being in writing. If Deleuze judges Heidegger's philosophy inferior to his own based on to how well each conveys the correct understanding that "univocal Being belongs only to difference" (Deleuze, *Difference* 66), his conclusion is in turn based on each philosopher's individual judgments regarding which representational vehicles are most adequate to communicating that understanding. The process of selecting and promoting certain signifiers over others—or simply writing, insofar as writing is oriented toward communicating a common and correct meaning—is unmistakably a process of analogical judgment in Deleuze's sense, as the extent to which a signifier encourages or discourages "misunderstanding" can only be measured against the potential identity of what the author means to signify and what is ultimately understood via the signifier.

In effect, then, Deleuze argues that Heidegger's representing Being as "B̶e̶i̶n̶g̶" constitutes a poor judgment, since the connotation of "B̶e̶i̶n̶g̶" seems (at least to Deleuze) distinct from what Heidegger meant or should have meant to express. Meanwhile, Deleuze makes the superior judgment when he suggests that "non-being should rather be written (non)-being or, better still, ?-being" (*Difference* 64). Yet this means that some of the central components of *Difference and Repetition*'s argument and meaning, and not only its tangential "Note" on Heidegger, depend on correct representational judgements to guarantee their efficacy. Considering Deleuze's earlier diagnosis of judgment in general—that any philosophy functioning via the hierarchical decisions of "good sense" ultimately subordinates its differentiations to the rule of a superior identity (*Difference* 33-34)—as well as his ongoing indictment of representation as a co-conspirator in the subordination of difference to identity, one must conclude that his differential ontology, at least insofar as it can be identified with the text of *Difference and Repetition*,[5] remains inadequate to Being as difference in itself.

Following the implications of Deleuze's "Note" on Heidegger thus demonstrates how Deleuze's text is split by its own double/cross; in other words, it operates according two distinct and mutually contradictory standards. On one hand, Deleuze dismisses the

---

[5] While maintaining a clear distinction between the physical text of *Difference and Repetition* and the meaning or sense it depicts would rescue the book from this criticism, Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly attack the general form of that distinction in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Among other examples, their perspective is made clear in the following assertions: "contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 11); "There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made. Therefore a book also has no object" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 4); "There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 23).

relevance of judgment and the standard of identity to any ontological position. On the

other hand, his critiques of Heidegger and other philosophers, his implicit and explicit

promotion of his own conceptual formulations over others, and his selection and

justification of particular representational techniques over the course of writing are

meaningless unless judgment and the standard of identity are invoked as guides. Based on

this discrepancy, we can characterize Deleuze's subterranean deployment of the standard

of identity as what de Man in *Blindness and Insight* calls a critical blindness—an

argumentative flaw or gap that is not only unacknowledged by the writer, but must not be

acknowledged in order for the argument to constitute itself at all.

Far from constituting an indictment of Deleuze's text, however, de Man's

arguments in *Blindness and Insight* allow us to develop a much richer picture of how

meaning in *Difference and Repetition* operates. De Man makes clear that critical

blindness does not mark a text as failed or irrelevant, but instead guarantees its role in

literary history by opening it to a critical readership,[6] and it is in this sense that describing

Difference and Repetition as contradictory (although I have done so above) may not be at

all appropriate. In order for *Difference and Repetition*'s doubleness to constitute a

contradiction, it should encompass two delimited positions or complete judgments that

would be held against the standard of a common, identical ground. Yet the opposing

movements in *Difference and Repetition* are precisely judgment and something other than

judgment, difference in identity and difference in itself, or implicit grounding and the

---

[6] In reference to the critics he analyzes in his own study, de Man states that "[i]t should be clear by now that 'blindness' implies no literary value-judgment: Lukács, Blanchot, Poulet, and Derrida can be called 'literary,' in the full sense of the term, because of their blindness, not in spite of it" (141).

attempt to be "party to a universal *ungrounding*" (Deleuze, *Difference* 67). It is thus

appropriate that de Man depicts critical blindness not as a deadlock but as a "negative

movement," meaning it "leads language away from its asserted stand" rather than

definitively establishing an opposing stand (103). While the opposing terms of a

contradiction would each participate in staking out the identical ground that lies between

them, Deleuze's strains differ from each other without marking in themselves the

common character of that difference. One could say that their relationship is comparable

to that relationship between a position and a vector, or between space and time, in that

each distinguishes itself in a dimension that is foreign to the other. Incredibly, this

dynamic begins to look exactly like the structure of differentiation Deleuze aims to

explicate in *Difference and Repetition*, in that it is a presentation of difference in which

difference is not "[t]he difference 'between' two things" but rather "determination *as*

such" (28). This upshot is consistent with de Man's assertion that blindness is not

straightforwardly aberrant to the discourse it accompanies, since it actually forms the

methodological basis of that discourse's ability to "grope toward a certain degree of

insight" (106). In *Difference and Repetition*, as in the texts de Man analyzes, only an

assemblage of what the author says and what he does not or cannot say renders the

greatest concrete extension of his critical insight.[7]

---

[7] Consistent with de Man's theory, it is important to note that Deleuze (at least to the extent of his role as *Difference and Repetition*'s author) must nevertheless remain blind to what his discourse excludes: if he were to illuminate the underlying functioning of the double/cross (e.g., as an economy of blindness and insight), this would be tantamount to reinscribing it within a conceptual identity. The best that can be done is to credit Deleuze's project retroactively, by invoking a degree of critical distance from his authorship. For de Man, it is the necessity of this critical distance (which can be read quite literally, as a distance in space and time) that gives criticism an open and ongoing history rather than an already constituted *telos*.

If *Difference and Repetition*'s expression of difference manifests in part through the doubleness of its representational text, then this expression is in fact reflected quite well by the inherently doubled signifier "~~Being~~." First, an erasure such as "~~Being~~" must include at least two distinct trajectories of meaning: most basically, the strikethrough over an erased word can only appear as such (i.e., as a strikethrough, rather than as a simple line or the letter *X*) because it is set on top of a different signifier conveying a different meaning, from which the erasing gesture dissents. What is crucial, however, is that these two trajectories are not set against a common ground. It would be impossible to characterize their relationship using a judgment such as "*X* is more adequate than Being" or vice versa, since the two components independently do not aspire to represent the same concept. For this reason, erasure does not submit to a synthesis: it remains double.

On one side, the *X* in "~~Being~~" effects a dissolution of the identity of Being without determining the content following that dissolution; indeed, what follows "~~Being~~" could be anything, nothing, or even a rewriting of the erased signifier. On the other side, the retained legibility of the word "Being" beneath the erasure opens a dimension of signification that is itself split: it is on one hand entirely extraneous to what the writer ultimately intends to say, but on the other an indispensible background determining the context and direction of the erasing mark. In either case, one trajectory acts as the unilateral ungrounding of the other, replicating the structure Deleuze sketches in his demand that

> instead of something distinguished from something else, [we] imagine
> something which distinguishes itself – and yet that from which it

distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it. It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground. (*Difference* 28)

To understand Deleuze's demonstration of difference in itself as a function of his critical blindness, however, Deleuze's metaphor must be double/crossed against itself, so that the means by which his thought "'makes' the difference" or "'makes' difference" itself ("*'fait' la différence*" [Deleuze, *Difference* 28; *Différence* 44])[8] is not assumed to be univocal. This is a task for which erasure is especially well positioned, since, when it comes to the trajectories inscribed in an erasure such as "~~Being~~," each acts as lightning to the other's black sky.

Double/crossed trajectories of this kind appear in numerous readings of textual erasure. Depending on the commentary, erasure's doubleness may be seen as encompassing creative differentiation and destructive annihilation (Goldberg), transparency and opacity (Grésillon), disparity and unity (Magnien), sensible particularity and abstract generality (Passeron), visible appearance and invisible law (Clévenot), the virtuality of the work and the materiality of the medium (Giotta, Marin, Richir), or the

---

[8] While the French phrase *fait la différence* can be translated accurately into the English phrase "makes the difference," in the context of Deleuze's chapter on "difference in itself" ("*la différence en elle-même*") it can also be translated as "makes difference" in the general sense. In this way, the phrase could already be said to double/cross itself: the first translation implies thought's functionally differentiating itself from the thinking of identity, while the second implies thought's creation of difference as an identity in grammatical and conceptual terms.

writing subject and the reading subject (Tenaguillo y Cortazar, Dürrenmatt),[9] among

others. Most importantly, nearly all of the commentators who describe these binaries

stress that the juxtaposed terms do not offer themselves for synthesis, but rather

determine themselves as independent grounds. It is in this sense that erasure's trajectories

are both persistently double and oriented in opposite directions. Within each of these

binaries, erasure forces a bifurcation in the meanings it makes available for interpretation:

either of the two differentiated trajectories must be pursued unilaterally if its complete

implications are to be comprehended.

To illustrate this structure, consider a relatively quotidian form of erasure: a

crossed out word in a literary manuscript. In the terms proposed by Kim Young Hae and

Michel Constantini, such an erasure allows us to differentiate a "pheno-text [*phéno-

texte*]," the definitive form of the text in which the erased word is excluded, while

simultaneously preserving a "geno-text [*géno-texte*]" in which the initial word is

preserved as a stratum of the total creative process (73). Each of these texts introduces its

own trajectory of understanding: the pheno-text would be understood according to the

continuity of the finished work, while the geno-text would be understood according to the

continuity of the writer's labour. Yet fidelity to either text entails a disruption of the other:

grasping the definitiveness of the pheno-text depends on seeing the erasure only as an

inferior precursor, while legitimizing the erased word's legibility in the geno-text

---

[9] Importantly, this difference is not based on the writer's and reader's opposing relationships to a common ground of intersubjectivity, but on the fundamental and irreconcilable split between their spatial and temporal contexts. This is why, for both Amancio Tenaguillo y Cortazar and Jacques Dürrenmatt, the most basic example of the writer-reader difference is not the distinction between two individuals, but the doubleness of writing itself.

delegitimizes the intended unity of the finished work.

Both erasure and Deleuze's "determination *as such*" (*Difference* 28), therefore, manifest by way of asymmetrical doublets: although each figure's two trajectories cross, there is no single ground from which both of them can be held in equal standing. Just as Young Hae and Constanini's literary manuscript must be studied either as pheno-text or geno-text—and cannot be understood as both at once without abandoning certain details of its meaning—Deleuze's metaphorical imagining of lightning against the black sky requires the imaginer to foreground one element against the other. Even if Deleuze's aim is to indicate the rising up of the ground so that it no longer acts merely as a background, the movement of this rising cannot be conceptualized without temporarily adopting the initial hierarchy; in other words, one's eye must be caught by the lightning alone before its interaction with the black sky can be understood as constituting "a single determination" (Deleuze, *Difference* 28).

Although these appear to be only particular examples, it is precisely such concrete differentiations of being that thinkers such as Deleuze and Heidegger attempt to account for, and the doubleness they replicate remains intractable within differential ontology. Its persistence is evident in the distinction between Deleuze's and Heidegger's ontologies themselves; as Miguel de Beistegui, who attends more than most to the similarities between the two thinkers, asserts, their work necessitates "a question of envisaging Being as made up of two sides" (23) from which emerges a "double language" or "double truth of Being" (24). Certainly, the necessity for philosophy to speak a language at all, or to be put into writing, contributes to this doubleness. In problems of verbal translation—or

even those of non-verbal punctuation and diacritical marking, such as Deleuze's

distinction of "~~Being~~" from "?-being" or "(non)-being" within the thinkers' otherwise

similar projects—the apprehension of differential ontology requires both for it to be split

and for one of the ensuing trajectories to be followed (i.e., to the concepts and assertions

it alone makes viable) at the expense of the other. Erasure and "~~Being~~," however,

acknowledge not only that these matters of textuality are not extraneous to the

ontological project, but also that, while the divisions they introduce remain intractable,

they can be taken up within differential ontology's own texts to enrich or thicken its

approach toward the being of difference.

  The specifically asymmetrical quality of erasure's doubleness may have been

recognized most astutely by Derrida. In one of the interviews collected in *Positions*, he

states that

> [t]he form of the chiasm, of the *X*, interests me a great deal, not as the
>
> symbol of the unknown, but because there is in it […] a kind of fork (the
>
> series *crossroads*, *quadrifurcum*, *grid*, *trellis*, *key*, etc.) that is, moreover,
>
> unequal, one of the points extending its range further than the other: this is
>
> the figure of the double gesture, the intersection. (Derrida 70)

As I hope to demonstrate through the remainder of this dissertation, these ideas contribute

significantly to Derrida's perspectives on both philosophy and literature, which are the

main themes of the portion of the interview from which the above statement is taken.

Especially in the context of *Dissemination*'s complex argumentation, Derrida's indication

of the "unequal" relationship between the points gathered by the chiasm or *X* also bears

directly on his understanding of ontology. Most notably, his depiction of the chiasm or *X* (including, implicitly, the *X* printed over Heidegger's "Being") as an asymmetrical structure clarifies why *Dissemination*'s "crossroads of the *est* [is]"[10] (which Derrida connects directly to Heidegger's "~~Being~~") is not a matter of polysemy—whose "multiplicities and variations" are nonetheless always grounded "within the *horizon*, at least, of some integral reading which contains no absolute rift, no senseless deviation"— but of "plurivocity," whose interpretations are instead "*lived* as the enriching, temporary detours of some passion" (Derrida 350). By emphasizing the lived experience of the voice over the underlying possibility of semantic meaning, Derrida stresses that differential being remains entwined in a series of unequivocal expressions; while the voices of being are pluralized by difference, they are not gathered within a latent multiplicity but instead elevated to presence one at a time, temporarily and capriciously. In the same way that a crossroads cannot be known as such without travelling down just one of its paths (and, consequently, turning away from or blinding oneself to the others), differential ontology, insofar as it is written by particular individuals in the form of concrete texts, is thus the function of both the plurality of possibilities and the lived experience of limitation to a single trajectory. In other words, differential ontology manifests through a series of doublings that, while always reversible in theory, are

---

[10] In addition to its obvious connection to being, Derrida's text solicits the cardinal direction East, also written *est* in French. The homonym carries multiple significations: it connects the experience of ontology with the spatial experience of travel and distance; from a Western standpoint, it describes the inherent coordination of being with othering or turning toward the other (the Orient); and, in reference to the East Asian written characters also discussed in *Dissemination*, it implicates the conception of being as difference in the turn from the voice toward "graphicity" (Derrida 328), including the strictly graphic dimension of the signifiers of erasure.

necessarily asymmetrical in practice.

Derrida's long citation of *The Question of Being* subsequent to the above statement suggests that Heidegger, too, took up erasure to signify the asymmetrical doubleness of turning toward and away from Being that Deleuze calls "determination *as such*." Many of Heidegger's writings on Being are dominated by similar figures, often in the form of a dynamic between concealment, or the withdrawal of beings, and *aletheia*—that is, truth as unconcealment or revelation, Heidegger's famous substitute for the classical notion of fixed, eternal truth. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," this dynamic is played out between "the earth" and "the world," whose coexistence is asymmetrically mediated by art. In "What Is Metaphysics?" the poles are the Being of beings, or their absolute strangeness or otherness, and "the nothing," the source of repelling or turning away which, once applied to our mundane conception of particular beings, also allows for our turning toward Being in general. The nature of these bivalent relationships, in which both poles are co-dependent yet contribute distinctly and unequally to the oscillating movement between them, reproduces Heidegger's conceptualization of the asymmetrical doubleness concretely experienced in erasure.

Nonetheless, it is by concretely incorporating erasure into his ontological writing that Heidegger elaborates this movement to its greatest extent, since "~~Being~~" goes furthest in bridging the distance between concept and experience that ontology, in raising the question of what is essential to all beings, seeks precisely to eliminate. Throughout his writings, Heidegger is attentive to the need to balance his texts' proliferating conceptual dualities with the persistent assertion that Being is constituted by the dynamic

irruption of differentiation between these categories, and not the categories themselves

(i.e., insofar as they could be seen as self-identical). Heidegger often accomplishes this

through his use of language, employing distinctive phrasings such as "[t]he *world*

worlds" ("Origin" 170) and "[t]he nothing itself nihilates" ("What" 103) to shift his

language's descriptive force from what Being and beings are to what they do, or, in the

linguistic dimension of ontology, from nouns to verbs. By acting on his famous

pronouncement that language is the "precinct" or "house of Being" (*Poetry* 129) in this

fashion, Heidegger aims to craft an ontology that participates in Being simultaneously

with describing it, anticipating the dismantling of representational judgment Deleuze

would attempt in his own ontology. Yet the rhetorical or poetic style of these expressions,

while it succeeds in centring its subjects' indebtedness to concrete processes of

differentiation unrestricted by conceptual identity, also fails to acknowledge the

asymmetrical doubleness by means of which these processes can be recognized as

differentiation in the first place. In other words, expressions such as "[t]he *world worlds*,"

and even *Being and Time*'s foundational assertion that "[t]he being of being 'is' itself not

a being" (Heidegger 5), only highlight the way in which Being is dynamic and concrete

(e.g., within the concrete text or spoken language of Heidegger's ontological works) at

the expense of reinforcing its identification with singular metaphysical ideas, such as "the

world" and "the nothing."

It is in regard to this problem, finally, that erasure uniquely figures the

asymmetrical doubleness of differential ontology within the concrete manifestation of

Heidegger's writing. In *The Question of Being*, Heidegger introduces erasure precisely to

address both of the following concerns: Being must depend on the asymmetrical

movement of "turning-towards," and this "turning-towards" must be prior to the

identification of its subjects and objects in both their grammatical and their ontological

senses, since they must in all dimensions "belong together" before they can "be for

themselves" (*Question* 77). Therefore,

> [i]f turning-towards belongs to "Being" and in such a way that the latter is
>
> based on the former, then "Being" is dissolved in this turning. It now
>
> becomes questionable what Being which has reverted into and been
>
> absorbed by its essence is henceforth to be thought of. Accordingly, a
>
> thoughtful glance ahead into this realm of "Being" can only write it as
>
> ~~Being~~. (Heidegger, *Question* 81)

At this moment, it seems absolutely clear what Heidegger means to communicate by

crossing out Being: that "turning-towards" is ontologically prior both to the substance of

beings and to the nothing from which they arise, since in the latter case "[n]othingness,"

too, "would have to be written, and that means thought of, just like ~~Being~~" (*Question* 83).

Yet "Being" and "nothingness" cannot be strictly excised from the formulation, since it is

only through their relationship that "turning-towards" can act as such—that is, as an

asymmetrical movement—and effect their dissolution. "~~Being~~" expresses the

asymmetrical doubleness of these elements alongside the plurivocity it evokes, crossing

Being against nothingness at the same time as it crosses each against its own turning

toward or away from, each concept's identity against its dissolution in difference, and

each printed word—"Being" and "nothingness" insofar as they concretely appear in the

text of *The Question of Being*—against its withdrawal under the *X* of erasure.

* * *

  While erasure manifests in asymmetrical doublets, the series of doublings it evokes is both reversible and plurivocal. In this way, the trajectories encompassed by "~~Being~~" can be called asymmetrical in at least two senses. One sense, highlighted above, describes how the two trajectories partitioned by erasure cannot be held on equal standing in relation to an identical ground; rather, whichever trajectory is pursued must be pursued unilaterally. The second sense is a consequence of the first, but situated within a specific instance and interpretation of erasure. In Heidegger's case, the doubleness of "~~Being~~" is asymmetrical because he does in fact pursue and prefer one of its trajectories at the expense of the other: he pursues the dissolution of the identity of Being. The difference between these asymmetrical trajectories is not based on any difference in the total field of possible meanings they make available, but on how the readers or writers who follow one of these trajectories singularly position themselves in relation to the field. Each is distinguished by its responsibility for either extending, via the concreteness of voice or writing, a certain interpretive trajectory at the expense of the other, or else lingering on the trajectories' doubleness at the expense of actualizing either of them.

  Heidegger's "~~Being~~" is unique in its ability to indicate both manifestations of

asymmetry. As both Heidegger and Deleuze recognize, to write "Being" at all implies

that the expression of the universal ontological identity of beings is potentially viable;

therefore, to render "Being" legibly while also crossing it out means preserving this

potentiality alongside its exclusion from ontological investigation. Although they cannot

be maintained together without deeply disrupting the very practice of ontology—which

is, indeed, one of Heidegger's primary aims—"~~Being~~" must encompass both of these,

since neither on its own would justify Heidegger's unusual choice of signifier. This

doubleness of Heideggerian ontology is elaborated in Maurice Blanchot's *The Step Not*

Beyond, whose French title, *Le Pas Au-Delà*, replicates the simultaneously linguistic and

logical density of Heidegger's writing in its ambiguously meaning "the step beyond,"

"the not beyond," and "the 'not beyond.'" Derrida's subsequent extension of Blanchot's

figure into that of the "[*p*]*as sans pas*" (*Truth* 33)—which could be translated any of four

ways, as "step without step," "step without not," "not without step," or "not without

not"—demonstrates the potential for an indefinite pluralization and thickening of the

reversals and doublings introduced by Heidegger's erasure.

Nonetheless, I argue that Blanchot's tradition of reading Heidegger may be further

developed to better reflect the inherent asymmetries of Heidegger's thinking of "~~Being~~,"

especially insofar as they underlie the concrete manifestation of Heidegger's thought in

his writing, as well as in the critical and cultural history of that writing. While

acknowledging the doubleness of Heidegger's "step not beyond" is important for

appreciating the style of ontological thought he promoted, it only begins to address the

question of how that style, insofar as it allows itself to be haunted by the spectre of the

identity of Being, can in fact be consistently read, cited, and remembered as a predominantly differential ontology. In other words, how does *The Question of Being* approach the thinking of Being as difference while nonetheless preserving the potentiality of Being's identity? And how is it that Heidegger's inscribing the identity of Being within "~~Being~~" does not counteract that approach, but instead reinforces it (at least in the eyes of many of Heidegger's readers, Deleuze excluded)?

The answer can be understood through the figure of the step itself, though in an even more literal sense than those employed by Blanchot and Derrida. In much the same way that "~~Being~~" asymmetrically includes opposing ontological trajectories, the physical spread of a step in bipedal locomotion stretches both with and against its intended direction, yet ultimately leverages this spread into forward movement. This is because the directions of each foot's extension are accompanied by the concrete establishment of a finite distance between them, which (granting the finite span of time needed to reorient oneself and take an additional step) is necessary to establish more advanced footholds in the spatial dimension of position, which is more and other than that of direction by itself. Similarly, the textual and conceptual thickness of Heidegger's work—which is also multidimensional, in that it involves the circularity of Heidegger's reasoning, the ambiguity of his language, and the literally multilayered manifestation of signifiers such as "~~Being~~"—allows differential ontology to advance by establishing a written corpus that concretely differentiates itself from the traditional ontology of identity. To adapt the words of Catherine Malabou, it is by thematizing and then "progressively eras[ing]" "the original model or standard" (*What* 6) in this way that ontological thought, in the concrete

sense of its manifestation in unique acts of writing, exposes itself to its own

transformation.[11] It is important to understand that none of these qualities make

Heidegger's "~~Being~~" a more truthful or revelatory representation of differential being

than, for example, Deleuze's "?-being" or "(non)-being." As George Pattison (10),

Graham Priest (245), and Michael Watts (28) note in their discussions of Heidegger's

erasure, "~~Being~~" instead emphasizes that the truth of Being lies beyond the capabilities of

human representation in general. However, "~~Being~~" performs the extension of differential

ontology toward difference more concretely than Deleuze's formulations, as well as

providing a more sophisticated exhibition of that extension's positioning within historical

experience. Insofar as differential ontology (like philosophical thought in general) has a

history, difference in itself is approached only through a series of incremental works

constituted across space and time. The accomplishment of "~~Being~~" is to allow us to

experience those increments as concrete steps.

  Although it privileges Deleuze's work over Heidegger's, Jonathan Dronsfield's

"Between Heidegger and Deleuze There Never Is Any Difference" is helpful for

characterizing the link between the doubleness of Heidegger's "~~Being~~" and his treatment

of history. Beginning with the two thinkers' treatment of the question in philosophy,

Dronsfield states that "most philosophers, Heidegger among them […], go back over the

---

[11] While Malabou uses this phrasing to describe learning in the context of the physical brain, the scope of her work, which includes extensive meditations on Heideggerian and Derridean philosophy alongside investigations of the neurosciences' notion of brain plasticity, reinforces her opinion that philosophy, thought, and consciousness are inherently linked to the materiality and form of human technology and the human body. As she states in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, "[i]t is no longer important to ask whether brain and consciousness are one and the same thing—let us put aside this old and specious debate. Instead we must constitute this strange critical entity, at once philosophical, scientific, and political, that would be a *consciousness of the brain*" (Malabou 2).

question in order to get out of it, which for Deleuze is futile" (151), ultimately indicating

a substantial distinction between the thinkers' understanding of the role of history in

differential ontology. While Heidegger affirms the importance of history to the continuity

of the philosophical enterprise, Deleuze asserts that to recognize history at all is already

to be oppressed by historicism, locking philosophy into the traditional paradigm of origin

and telos that differential ontology must explode (Dronsfield 160). According to Deleuze,

one does not reach history's outside from within history, since "[g]etting out is already

achieved, or else it never will be" (Deleuze and Parnet 1; qtd. in Dronsfield 151).

Meanwhile, for Dronsfield, Heidegger's "go[ing] back over the question" constitutes an

"equivocation" or "perhaps even an oscillation back and forth along the line between the

two opposing directions" (159).

　　Despite Dronsfield's criticisms, the meaning and efficacy of this oscillation can be

greatly clarified with reference to "~~Being~~." More than a simple "equivocation" or inertly

symmetrical back and forth, "~~Being~~" signifies the asymmetrical inscription of the

ontology of identity within Heidegger's advancement of differential ontology. Heidegger

does not fall back into history and remain there, but takes it up in order to extend it; as he

suggests in *The Question of Being*, "the circle is a hidden spiral" (81). The sense in which

the oscillation or circling of Heidegger's discourse also exhibits a privileged direction is

closely related to the operation of "~~Being~~" as a kind of bipedal step, in that it may be said

not only to retrace the "line between […] two opposing directions" but to constitute the

line in its concrete material dimensionality, thus allowing it to be traversed differently

and farther. In this way, Heidegger's "hidden spiral" also bears on the question of history

in a way that Deleuze's instantaneous or already accomplished break with history does not. The doubleness of "~~Being~~" is not finally inert, but instead constitutes the finite extension and thickening of differential ontology's time and place. Both Heidegger's writing "Being" and his crossing it out belong to the history of differential ontology as distinct yet contiguous material durations, and the manifestation of a dimensional space between them, therefore, is a historical accomplishment—not because it breaks free of history, but because it is itself history.

In *The Question of Being*'s conceptual dimension, the thickness of Heidegger's differential ontology is elaborated in his complex discussion of what he calls "the line." This line is not the line running "between […] two opposing directions" described by Dronsfield (159), but a benchmark or limit, an imaginary transverse line that these directions cross. Heidegger begins with Ernst Jünger's conceptualization, in *Across the Line*, of a line that would signify the completion of nihilism as the Nietzschean devaluation of all values; in crossing the line, human reality would enter a new era with entirely novel values and understandings (Heidegger, *Question* 35). Yet, as *The Question of Being* develops its arguments, Heidegger's discourse acknowledges both the need to enter into this new era and the necessity of continuing to recognize the values of the old era. Heidegger suggests to Jünger that "in the space on this side of and on the other side of the line, you speak the same language" (*Question* 51). Yet Heidegger seems ultimately to leave himself open to the same accusation; even as he goes on to transform the language of Being and of the line itself, he maintains that the extent to which the old values vanish nevertheless does not eliminate their capacity to enkindle old thoughts and

meanings (*Question* 83-85). This aspect of recovery or preservation is further reflected in

Heidegger's conceptualization of the restoration of oblivion to Being—which is

accomplished by the recognition that Being is "turning-towards" or "~~Being~~"—not as the

dismissal and elimination of metaphysics (Heidegger's catchword for Western philosophy

before nihilism and the line) but as the "restoration of metaphysics" (Heidegger, *Question*

91).

     Rather than an absolute novelty, this restoration is a remembrance that embraces

the essence of Being as it always was, prior to the crossing of the line that nevertheless

also changes everything. As Heidegger summarizes this double movement, he indicates

neither its reconciliation nor any genuine conflict between its parts. In his words, "the

restoration of metaphysics seems at first to be an overcoming, a conquest [….] But in

restoring, the enduring truth of the apparently rejected metaphysics now really returns to

be henceforth its adopted *essence*" (Heidegger, *Question* 91). The two interpretations

cannot be held simultaneously. Yet they are also not opposed, since Heidegger ultimately

enfolds them both within his conception of "restoration." In *Heidegger and Derrida:*

Reflections on Time and Language, Herman Rapaport refers to this structure as

"paronomasic movement," identifying it both as Heidegger's most distinctive

philosophical strategy and as the key to the revaluation of history and temporality

performed across his work. Paronomasia, in Rapaport's sense, precisely describes *The*

Question of Being's strategy of "going beyond even as one stays in the same place,"

though in such a way that the contrast situates itself in a new "modality of time or

history" rather than an insoluble paradox (Rapaport 14).

It remains unclear, however, how this "modality" should be characterized, and while Rapaport relies on Blanchot's and Derrida's readings of Heidegger to elaborate its consequences, *The Question of Being* suggests that it is inherently linked to the philosopher's own implication in the project of ontology. According to Heidegger, "[m]an in his essence is the memory of Being, but [*aber*] of ~~Being~~. This means that the essence of man is a part of that which in the crossed intersected lines of Being puts thinking under the claim of an earlier demand" (Heidegger, *Question* 83). In the first place, Heidegger's notion of "an earlier demand" is crucial in that it replicates the doubleness of "~~Being~~." Following his argument that Being is primordially grounded in "turning-towards," Heidegger's "earlier demand" is to understand Being not as an object or identity standing for itself, but as the movement of "turning-towards" that is ontologically prior to the establishment of identity. On the other hand, the written signifier "~~Being~~" manifestly includes an "earlier demand" that is exactly the opposite; since it requires its reader to understand it via the potential identity of Being signified by the erased word "Being," "~~Being~~" preserves the demand of the metaphysical systems whose development within human history precedes Heidegger's differential ontology. The result is a chiasmus of opposed temporalities each of which is nevertheless "earlier," causing Heidegger's concrete philosophical "step" to be bivalently constituted in double/crossed trajectories."~~Being~~" is both the indication of a primordial "turning-towards" beyond representational identity and an inscription of the potentiality of Being's representational identity in "Being."

Yet Heidegger's description indicates that there is something more to this scene,

as well: there is also the essence of humanity and its memory of Being, which gathers the doubleness of "B̶e̶i̶n̶g̶" in its "being present" ("*An-wesen*") both in the present and into the future (*Question* 82-83). This "gathering at the point of intersection"—which is simultaneously the literal crossing of the lines that erase "Being" and the spiritual crossing of the "fourfold" ("*Gevierts*" [Heidegger, *Question* 82-83]) further described in Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking" and other texts—constitutes the spatiality and temporality of humanity's thinking Being in the concrete instance of writing "B̶e̶i̶n̶g̶." By giving material form to the chiasmus of "B̶e̶i̶n̶g̶," Heidegger's act of representation thus transforms the abstract negation or paradox of differential ontology's doubleness into the thickness of concrete history.[12]

If thinking "B̶e̶i̶n̶g̶" means maintaining its doubleness alongside its asymmetrical extension into historical space and time, Heidegger's ontology cannot simply be a matter of positioning oneself on just one side of "the line." Indeed, this is precisely Heidegger's conclusion in *The Question of Being*: Heidegger states that "Man does not only stand *in* the critical zone of the line. He himself […] *is* this zone and thus the line" (83). In this sense, the doubleness of the line's two sides is also preserved: if humanity *is* the line, "[t]hen the possibility of a *trans lineam* and its crossing also vanishes" (Heidegger,

---

[12] Fredric Jameson describes a similar functioning of the chiasmus, although he ascribes it to Marx's use of the technique in *Capital*. According to Jameson,

> [c]hiasmus is in this sense a form of the equation, but one in which the reversal of terms is called upon to promote the act of identification to a new or higher level, or else to introduce temporality into a process notoriously subject to the mirage of synchronicity. (23)

Although Marx's and Heidegger's philosophical works remain distinct in many ways, Jameson's conclusion that Marx, like Heidegger, uses the chiasmus to expose conventionally inert or synchronous structures to an additional, asymmetrical temporal dimension suggests potential links between Marx's economic materialism and Heidegger's application of language and writing to ontology.

Question 83)—but not without a trace, since, as Heidegger suggests in the very next

sentence, "[t]he more we think about 'the line,' the more does this directly accessible

picture vanish without making it necessary for the thoughts which are enkindled by it to

lose their meaning" (83-85). In fact, the notion of "crossing" itself has transformed.

Because of the paronomasic doubling by which the step beyond the line is also its own

impossibility, crossing the line cannot effect an uncomplicated or immediate leap[13] to a

new alterity that would leave the line behind, as in Deleuze's proposed manner of

"getting out" of the question of history by never having been in it (Deleuze and Parnet 1).

Yet the transverse dimension of the crossing is also not annihilated; instead of leaping

over and annihilating the line, however, the crossing becomes a double/cross that

inscribes the line within it and becomes the line's thickness. If we *are* the line, we do not

stand before or after it as we would stand in relation to a discrete limit. Rather, we inhabit

it as a "zone" with its own topology and plurality of trajectories,[14] thickening and

---

[13] As Joan Stambaugh points out in her introduction to Heidegger's *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger, too, employs the figure of the leap in his attempt to move beyond metaphysics and the grounding of Being in identity. However, her statement that, according to Heidegger, "we cannot simply leave metaphysics by a series of reasoned conclusions. We must simply leap out of it" (Stambaugh 13) undermines the richer senses of the figure Heidegger emphasizes. If "the principle (*Satz*) of identity becomes a leap (*Satz*) out of metaphysics" (Stambaugh 13), the bivalent process of this becoming—which is reflected precisely in the double meaning of the word "*Satz*"—is crucial. While Heidegger does represent this leap or "spring [*Sprung*]" beyond metaphysics as an "abrupt" or "unbridged entry" (*Identity* 33; *Indentität* 41), he is careful to describe the "spring" as constituted and motivated by both "the horizon of metaphysical thinking" and the novel perspective we achieve after we "spring and let go" (*Identity* 32). Further, in suggesting that what "vibrates" in the movement of the "spring" is in fact "the active nature of what speaks as language," Heidegger affirms its inherent dwelling in the concrete duration of his writing or speech. Heidegger makes clear that the "spring," if not exactly a bridge, is structured by a temporality that sets itself apart from the binaries of strictly logical argumentation. In this regard, he states that "[p]recisely because this entry requires a spring, it must take its time, the time of thinking which is different from the time of calculation that pulls our thinking in all directions" (Heidegger, *Identity* 41).

[14] Heidegger echoes this phrasing in his retort against Jünger's emphasis on developing a more schematic topography or "picture of the line":

A topography of nihilism, of its process, and of its overcoming is certainly needed. But

extending it across more dimensions than it initially appeared to evoke.[15]

With reference to Derrida's figures in *Dissemination* and *Positions*, we do not

cross to the line's other side, but instead cross through it or cross it out, transforming it

into an intersection or crossroads in which both of the sides or directions it indicates are

taken up asymmetrically, and asymmetrically pluralized. It turns out that Derrida's oeuvre

is filled with figures for this thickening. In *The Truth in Painting*, *parerga*—the frames or

limits separating the interiors of works from the contexts beyond them—"have a

thickness, a surface which separates them not only […] from the integral inside, […] but

also from the outside" (Derrida 60-61). If the *parergon* both "stands out against two

grounds [*fonds*]" and "merges [*se fond*]" those grounds into each other (Derrida, *Truth*

61), this is because it transforms the crossing between inside and outside into its own

figure, yet also maintains the asymmetry of inside and outside ensured by its function as a

frame. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida names this process of tracing the

parergon "*limitrophy*" (29). Here, again, his concern is with "complicating, thickening,

delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and

---

> the topography must be preceded by a topology: the discussion of that place which
> gathers Being and nothingness into its essence, determines the essence of nihilism, and
> thus makes known the paths on which the ways of a possible overcoming of nihilism are
> indicated. (*Question* 85)

[15] Timothy Clark's reading in *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of
Literature* achieves an almost identical conclusion. Further, he characterizes the transformation of the line
as its transformation into language (specifically dialogical language, or language marked by doubleness), as
I do below. Clark writes the following:

> ~~Being~~ […] not only negates the notion of 'Being' as standing *in itself* but inscribes within
> it the intersecting lines of the movement of relating itself. Likewise, the movement
> crossing over the line is replaced by a topological metamorphosis of the line itself, in a
> movement of crossing-out that not only alters a noun (Being), rendering it a verbal zone
> of relation; it also anticipates, in a schematic way, the syntactical twisting movement
> whereby language in dialogue ('the wait') is transformed. *Dialogicity* comprises 'being'
> as relating to itself (as language) in this topological transformation of the line. (51)

multiply"; Derrida seeks "to transform by thickening, for example, in curdling milk" (Derrida, *Animal* 29). Yet all this takes place without ever "effacing" or "questioning, even in the slightest, the limit" and its impassibility (Derrida, *Animal* 29). The experience of *limitrophy* is therefore "properly *transgressal*" and not transgressive (Derrida, *Animal* 29). In other words, the line is not crossed but crossed out or put under erasure, exhibiting "the possibility of a *trans lineam*" even as that possibility vanishes—or, more precisely, exhibiting the vanishing of that possibility as its own unique duration within history.

In the attempt to beckon true alterity or difference in itself into being and as Being, the thickening of the line cannot first be figured as a new horizon, but must involve taking up or proceeding from existing horizons differently. As Heidegger points out, if one looks solely and single-mindedly to the beyond of metaphysics, one's "restoration of metaphysics" (*Question* 91) will only "speak the same language" (*Question* 51), remaining blind to the way in which the traditional standard of identity continues to structure its representations. Certainly this blindness is a historical possibility, but (as is implied by the idea of blindness itself) it is only one way of engaging with differential ontology in its phenomenality, or as a concretely historical phenomenon. To the extent that we seek to rectify the inadequacy of representational language to difference in itself, we should instead see ourselves as being "on the way to language," as Heidegger puts it in his essay of that title—that is, not only seeking to change our position but also acting to transform the dimensional field within which our position is taken up. On the way to differential ontology, we become language or become ourselves becoming language. This is to say that we become authors; in concrete terms,

we write. In still other words, to thicken the line by becoming it is accomplished precisely in writing a text—or perhaps simply a letter to a fellow thinker, as Heidegger initially conceived of *The Question of Being*—"Concerning 'The Line,'" as Heidegger titled *The Question of Being*'s early drafts (*Question* 33).

What is crucial is that this act of writing—not to mention proofing, publishing, and disseminating—takes up time and space within history, and that the concrete, dimensional difference opened by its taking place cannot be separated from ontology either in theory or in practice. As Derrida puts it, "within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, *all is not to be thought at one go* [*tout n'est pas à penser d'un seul trait*]" (Derrida, *Grammatology* 23; *Grammatologie* 38).[16] Instead, we turn toward only by preserving the potentiality of turning backward, not to remain subject to our origins but to inscribe them within and beneath our prevailing trajectory and, in turn, take concrete steps away from them. Within differential ontology, finally, it is this double/cross of writing and/or thinking "~~Being~~" that, as Deleuze might put it, "makes the difference" (*Difference* 28).

[16] In addition to meaning "all at once" or "in one sitting" in a manner roughly analogous to the idiomatic English "at one go" used in Spivak's translation, Derrida's "*d'un seul trait*" also resonates with the extended meanings of "*trait*," including "line" or "stroke," as in a stroke of the pen, and "trait" or "characteristic," a means of description. The first alternative is reminiscent of doubleness of the strokes that compose and then also cross out "Being" in *The Question of Being*, since their comprehension as "~~Being~~" depends on their not being read as a single, isolated mark (i.e., alone or solely, according to these other translations of *seul*) but as several dimensions of meaning indicating crossed trajectories. More generally, Derrida's phrase also signifies the sense in which writing (including the writing of ontology) cannot be synthesized into a single event but must instead be read as a plurality, an indefinite number of marks taking up concrete time and space.

Chapter 2

Derrida's "*tour d'écriture*": Erasure, *Paleonymy*, and Responsibility

Heidegger's "~~Being~~" exemplifies the means by which Heideggerian philosophy gives differential ontology its history: by turning both away from and back toward the identity of Being within the space of a unique act of writing, "~~Being~~" thickens the line between identity and difference in such a way that we—as writers, readers, and thinkers on the way to difference in itself—can concretely inhabit it. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to question whether Heidegger was able to achieve these insights in his own lifetime. Despite his pivotal critique of the ontology of identity, it is easy to understand Heidegger's philosophy as insistently pursuing an idealized (and thus ostensibly self-identical) sense of Being that prevented him from realizing the fuller consequences of his writing. On one hand, *Being and Time*'s approach to the thesis that Being *is* time, or more specifically the ecstatic field of differential temporalization, introduces the notion that ontology can be elaborated through phenomenal experience in the latter's plurality. But Heidegger's insistence that ontological time is radically distinct from the ontic or everyday time usually taken as the experience of temporality, especially in conjunction with his emphasis on the particularity and exclusivity of authentic ontological thought, seems to place his understanding of difference in itself far beyond the reach of something as phenomenally ordinary as writing. Heidegger's often-remarked "turn" from his analysis of *Dasein* to his emphasis on Being itself only exacerbates this problem, since

his indication of a concept of Being distinct from beings (despite his also frequently suggesting that such a distinction is impossible) continued to execute—in practice if not in principle—the same gestures that traditionally reduced ontology to a certain set of ideal forms.

Derrida is often credited with critiquing this shortcoming of Heidegger's thought, and this critique is often understood to be the crucial factor differentiating his and Heidegger's philosophies. For example, Christopher Norris's classic accounts of deconstruction describe how Derrida draws techniques such as writing under erasure "directly from Heidegger's textual practice" (*Deconstruction* 69) in pursuit of a goal the two philosophers share—the overcoming of metaphysics—yet also "cancels or reverses this debt by questioning Heidegger's own metaphysical motives" (*Turn* 24). According to this interpretation, Heidegger's pursuit of primordial Being as an originary presence makes his philosophy a residually metaphysical affair, leading Derrida to mount a more thorough overcoming of the philosophical tradition. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interprets Derrida's development of the Heideggerian erasure "~~Being~~" similarly. In her lengthy preface to *Of Grammatology*, she suggests that Heidegger's "~~Being~~" continues to suggest a "master-word" or origin (Spivak, Translator's xv) beneath its reframing of Being as an "inarticulable presence" (Spivak, Translator's xvii); meanwhile, Derrida's translation of erasure to the trace completes the destruction of metaphysical presence by thematizing an "always already absent presence" or "lack at the origin" (Spivak, Translator's xvii). These canonical interpretations of Derrida's work have resulted in a narrative of philosophical progress that has rarely been challenged: according to them,

Derrida learned from Heidegger's erasure to cross the line Heidegger could not cross.

This formulation, however, should give pause. In chapter 1, I argued from Heidegger's *The Question of Being* that erasure does not allow us to cross the line definitively but only to thicken it, since it retains, as an inscribed double, the trace of what it crosses out alongside its asymmetrical movement beyond. Neither Spivak nor Norris endeavours to remove erasure from the bestiary of Derrida's key techniques,[1] yet both associate Derrida's thought with a radical leap forward that fits poorly with erasure's doubleness. It is also difficult, especially when the key passages of *Of Grammatology* Spivak relies on are read closely, to conclude that Derrida attributed this kind of decisive achievement to his own work. When Derrida suggests that *différance* would be "more 'originary'" than Heidegger's formulation of ontico-ontological difference, it is well understood that the concept of origin itself should not be allowed to remain unaltered beneath the proposal (*Grammatology* 23). As Derrida goes on to state, "one would no longer be able to call [*différance*] origin or ground, those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference" (*Grammatology* 23). Yet it is also extremely important that simple negation (i.e., difference or *différance* seen simply as a non- or anti-origin) does not lead the assault on origin alone, since such a linear opposition, as Deleuze argues persuasively in *Difference and Repetition*, would continue to rely on and reinforce the logical grounding of a certain

---

[1] For Spivak, erasure is an essential constitutive element of the trace, as she indicates in her use of the expression "~~trace~~" (a formulation Derrida does not use himself [Translator's xvii]). Norris, alongside his suggestion that Derrida's best-known writing techniques are deeply Heideggerian, demonstrates his interpretation's reliance on the figure of erasure in his statement that Derrida "cancels or reverses" his debt to Heidegger (*Turn* 24).

self-identical presence. Rather, *Of Grammatology*'s "more 'originary'" should be

understood in the manner of *Dissemination*'s "*plus-que-présent*" ("more-than-present").

In both, the step beyond the "bottom" of a previously recognized presence actually

preserves that presence in a structure that is alternatively bottomless and a "double

bottom" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 309). It is as if the expression "more 'originary'" erases

the origin, inscribing it within a doubleness whose asymmetry or bias (the "more")

privileges something other than origin while continuing to constitute itself through and

across the denigrated concept. Or, even more literally, it is as if Derrida had written of

Being's "origin" in ontico-ontological difference before crossing it out and writing

"*différance*" instead.

  As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, erasure is one of the most evocative

depictions in Derrida's oeuvre of the illogical (or perhaps alogical) combination of

duplication, extension, and difference that constitutes Derrida's response to the problem

of (Heideggerian) ontology. It is therefore no surprise that Derrida describes his approach

using the figure of erasure directly. He writes:

> [Differance by itself] can […] be thought of in the closest proximity to
>
> itself only on one condition: that one begins by determining it as the
>
> ontico-ontological difference before erasing that determination. The
>
> necessity of passing through that erased determination, the necessity of
>
> that *turn/trick of writing* [*tour d'écriture*] is irreducible. (Derrida,
>
> *Grammatology* 23-24; translation modified; *Grammatologie* 38)

Erasure rend(er)s the doubleness of the ontic and the ontological in a multidimensional

act of writing—that is, one in which at least two interpretive trajectories are delineated, one originating "before" and the other after the act's "passing through"—and in this way transforms their conceptual opposition into a concrete spacing out (*espacement*, in Derrida's French) of distance or time. For Heidegger, the doublet of self-identical Being and difference in itself is inscribed within a historical dimension that allows both to manifest, albeit asymmetrically, in the literal writing of differential ontology. Although Derrida maintains fidelity both to the structure of Heidegger's erasure and to its concrete components (since he must "pass through that erased determination"), the products of his writing under erasure are different. Along the lineage differentiated by "~~Being~~," specifically upon reaching the extension of its history constituted by the literal event of Derrida's reading of Heidegger, the doublet has transformed. When Heidegger crosses out "Being," he erases an idealized entity that does not explicitly encompass erasure or the finitude of history; but Derrida erases an erasure, which already has a history. Thus, Derrida both differentiates his philosophical work from Heidegger's and comes closer to determining difference "in the closest proximity to itself," since he distances his gesture from the contamination of an ideality (Being) that duplicitously draws difference back. Yet this "closest proximity" can only be anticipated in its own ideality (i.e., as the closest proximity possible) by way of an empirical manifestation (i.e., as the closest proximity experienced so far), since it takes place only insofar as it works through the erased determinations of Heidegger's ontico-ontological difference and, ultimately, Being's transcendental self-identity. A perfect or ideal determination of difference in itself remains unachievable, precisely because its next step is always to further distance itself

from perfection or ideality as such. What Derrida's demonstration of the erasability of Heidegger's erasure shows, however, is that this impossibility in principle does not justify an abandonment of the project in fact: without ever completing the writing of differential ontology, one can (and perhaps must) always turn back to erasure, even if only to write more and erase again.

I am therefore not concerned with the question of whether there is an essential distinction between Heidegger's and Derrida's erasures, and my analysis leans much more heavily toward the empirical, historical, and phenomenal accomplishments of Derrida's writing. Yet I am also not interested in segregating those accomplishments from essential or ideal considerations. Rather, my aim in this chapter is to answer the question of what happens in the (empirical, historical, phenomenal) interval of Derrida's "passing through," by way of a proliferation of erasures and re-writings, phenomenological determinations of (essential, ideal) meaning. To "read" erasure, I argue, and specifically to read it in the sense demanded by both the fact of its concrete manifestation and the meaning of its deployment in works of philosophy or literature, requires this dynamic attention to multiple forms and transformations of reality, even if the result of this attention is only a limited plurality of trajectories, extensions, and voices.

I begin by focusing on an example (one of very few) of the literal, graphic manifestations of erasure in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, departing from the surprising tendency of Derrida's commentators to collapse Derrida's written erasures into more abstract deconstructive concepts. By attempting to remain as close as possible to the experience of reading Derrida's concrete text, I conclude that Derrida's erasures motivate

a complication or thickening of their own ostensible assertions, inscribing a finite yet indefinitely extended plurality of forks and double-crosses within their meanings. I then proceed to analyze the consequences of Derrida's *paleonymy*—the preservation of "old names" in writing under erasure (*Dissemination* 3)—both for the prospect of a general deconstructive philosophy and for the notion that Derrida's ethics is premised on an attention to absolutely singular circumstances (as Nicole Anderson argues in *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure*). Surprisingly, rethinking generality and singularity through the *paleonym* and its "power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21) indicates a crucial link between Derrida and the work of Edmund Husserl, leading me to conclude that *paleonymy* cannot be dissociated from the preservation and deployment of meaning (*Bedeutung*) in the ideal sense proposed by Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. Finally, by tracing the series of double/crossings that connect Husserl's phenomenological reduction to Derrida's writing under erasure, I propose that the latter exemplifies Derrida's notion of a Husserlian "radical responsibility" (*Edmund Husserl's* 141). Rather than the response to the other emphasized by Anderson, this "radical responsibility" is constituted by "taking responsibility" for the phenomena inaugurated by one's own acts of transcendental expression.

* * *

If erasure "makes the difference" as a function of its situation in the dimension of writing, as I argued through Deleuze and Heidegger in chapter 1, it seems reasonable to begin an analysis of the role of erasure in Derrida's work with what is, in fact, one of the only deployments of erasure in a concretely textual form throughout his oeuvre. Nonetheless, very few explanations of Derrida's writing under erasure make any reference to the single appearance of visible strikethroughs in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida writes:

> The "formal essence" of the sign can only be determined in terms of
> presence. One cannot get around [*contourner*] that response, except by
> challenging the very form of the question and beginning to think that the
> sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that escapes the instituting
> question of philosophy: "what is…?" (*Grammatology* 18-19;
> *Grammatologie* 31)

In the context of this writing, what difference does erasure make? Although the question seems simple, most of Derrida's readers miss the chance to answer it in perhaps the most direct and superficial way—by reading erasure as a concrete part of the text, one which would communicate an interpretable meaning in the same way that, for example, the text's alphabetic characters do. Spivak, for example (while nonetheless being one of the few commentators to quote this passage at all), implies that Derrida's strikethroughs stand as evidence of a broader conceptual gesture that their concrete manifestation alone does not clarify. According to Spivak, Derrida puts the word "sign" under erasure "[o]n the way to the trace/track," which is itself defined by its being always already erased

(Translator's xvii). This interpretation is curious, in the first place because the word "sign" itself does not appear under erasure in Derrida's text. More significantly, however, Spivak's explanation surreptitiously reinforces a process of interpretation from which erasure in its most literal sense (i.e., as a concrete, written mark) can be excised without consequence. According to Spivak, the sentence quoted above demonstrates Derrida's identification of the sign as a "structure of difference" and subsequent argument that it is "determined by the trace or track" (Translator's xvii). But Spivak's own discourse demonstrates that such a determination is entirely achievable without the use of erasure in the literal sense. It can even be achieved without an act of writing, since Spivak replicates it using the same manner of conceptual description that defines the epoch of metaphysics as *phono-logocentric*, or grounded in the truth of the (spoken) word as reason. In either case, erasure as it appears in Derrida's manuscript is merely an expedient to be employed "[o]n the way" to a more precise expression and an even more precise concept, and to be abandoned without further mention once that concept has been apprehended. In this sense, Spivak's interpretation implicitly agrees with the explicit findings of commentators such as Brenda Marshall and Niall Lucy, who conclude that writing under erasure is essentially no more than a "trick" or "gimmick"—useful insofar as it helps us recall the proper meaning of Derrida's concepts, but readily disposable at the exact moment it is instead found to encourage misunderstandings (Marshall 4; Lucy 128).[2]

---

[2] Lucy writes that "'Under erasure' refers to a practice of Heidegger's which Derrida employed sparingly in the past but seems to have abandoned, no doubt because what it can be taken to signify is too easily mistaken for a 'trick' or a 'gimmick' which can be used to trivialize deconstruction" (128). Although Lucy can be somewhat forgiven by the fact that his text is meant to be a practical guide to Derrida's work (and not a rigorous application of Derridean principles), it is remarkable how flagrantly he reapplies the

It turns out that Derrida's response to this conclusion is shot through with doubleness: in both principle and practice (though more precisely in his double/crossing of the two), he both affirms and disputes it. In one sense, it is not wrong to point out that Derrida could have explicated, and did explicate, writing under erasure, and even translated its key functions into those of other concepts,[3] without needing to employ textual erasures in the process; the simple fact that the overwhelming majority of Derrida's writings do not literally include such erasures is ample evidence of this. In another sense, however, it would work against Derrida's core theoretical concerns to suggest that the means demonstrated by the technique of erasure can be reduced to its ends. Broadly, much of Derrida's work in *Of Grammatology* and other texts of this period focuses on problematizing the manner in which discursive means—that is, discourse's technical or technological components, including rhetoric, language, and especially writing—have been traditionally excluded from considerations of the essence and value of thought. In this vein, *Of Grammatology* argues that the supplemental aspects of discursive systems (figured, through Rousseau, as writing in its relationship with speech)

conventional procedure of *phono-logocentric* thought in his commentary: having already assumed the univocal meaning and essence of deconstruction, Lucy seeks to safeguard that essence precisely by excluding writing. As the problems with this procedure are discussed across Derrida's extensive work on *phono-logocentrism* and metaphysics, it is not necessary to repeat them here. However, it is worth pointing out that Lucy's fear of erasure's being "mistaken" for an inadequate representation of deconstruction closely mirrors Deleuze's claim that Heidegger's "~~Being~~" "encouraged […] misunderstandings" of Heideggerian ontology; likewise, Lucy's argument demonstrates roughly the same form of critical blindness I ascribed to Deleuze in chapter 1.

[3] This translation would take the form of what Rodolphe Gasché describes as the movement between Derrida's "infrastructures" in *The Tain of the Mirror*, according to which the plurality concepts Derrida employs come to overlap and stand in for each other's conceptual functions. Gasché also argues, however, that the singularity and autonomy of each individual infrastructure is equally essential to the character of Derrida's thought, and much of the difficulty of interpreting Derrida's thought stems from the imperative to hold these seemingly contradictory characteristics together.

are in fact iterated at the heart of those systems from which they are meant to be excluded.[4] In reference to erasure specifically, and even more specifically to the erasure of Heidegger's ontico-ontological difference thematized in *Of Grammatology*'s "The Written Being / The Being Written [*L'être écrit*]," I have already quoted Derrida's stance: "that *turn/trick of writing* [*tour d'écriture*] is irreducible" (24; translation modified; *Grammatologie* 38).

What is incredible about Derrida's deployment, near the beginning of this section, of erasure as a concrete gesture is that it both reinscribes his philosophy's doubleness and reverses it, complicating its trajectories via the configuration of the double/cross. If Derrida's argumentation thematizes erasure's irreducibility without deploying erasure concretely, the strikethroughs that do manifest in Derrida's text draw attention to the concrete existence of erasure while simultaneously implying its reducibility to a more essential theme. Derrida's phrasing—"the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy" (*Grammatology* 19)—seems to communicate the same determination of its theme or subject (i.e., "the sign," which is both the grammatical and the conceptual subject of the sentence) regardless of whether the strikethroughs are taken into account.

One can confirm this reading using a relatively straightforward experiment: compare the meaning of the spoken sentence (which could not express the strikethroughs, since they are exclusively written signifiers) to the written sentence, then compare the results to those of the same test performed on a different erasure, such as Heidegger's.

---

[4] See part II, chapter 2 of *Of Grammatology*, "…That Dangerous Supplement…."

Heidegger's statement that "a thoughtful glance ahead into this realm of 'Being' can only

write it as ~~Being~~" (*Question* 81) cannot communicate its essential theme without its

strikethrough; removing the strikethrough, in fact, would cause the statement to suggest

the inverse of what Heidegger intends. In this case, the necessity of explicitly

apprehending the strikethrough in "~~Being~~" is reinforced by Heidegger's drawing attention

to the fact that his discourse is a written discourse, which he accomplishes not only by

referring to the act of writing in the sentence itself, but also by presenting *The Question*

of Being in its entirety as a written letter to Ernst Jünger. Conversely, Derrida's use of

strikethroughs—and, more broadly, the fact of his having written and not spoken the

sentence in question—can be readily understood as being irrelevant or excessive in

relation to what he communicates. Derrida does not write that "'sign' could only be

written as '~~sign~~,'" as Heidegger might have, not because he does not want to determine

the concept of the sign as "~~sign~~" (Spivak concludes quite correctly that, on a conceptual

level, he does) but because such a determination can be accomplished without putting

that erasure in writing. The strikethroughs he does put in writing, which would seem to

indicate the inadequacy of the words "is" and "thing" to any description of the sign,

contribute nothing to its determination as "~~sign~~" that is not already established by the

assertion that it escapes the question "what is…?" Moreover, Derrida's strikethroughs are

also not necessary for the rethinking of "is" and "thing" that the determination of "sign"

as "~~sign~~" would motivate; if the sign "is" a "thing" that nonetheless escapes the question

"what is…?" then the signs "is" and "thing"—although they must, on some level, act as

signs in order for the assertion to have been meaningful in the first place—are already

also neither things nor beings. It is as if the words "is" and "thing" are already erased by the meaning of the statement they are swept up in, since their deployment precisely where the sign escapes the question "what is…?" would already irrevocably distance them from their traditional signifying functions.[5] What we are left with is a statement that, in a way seldom seen in Derrida's oeuvre, seems to participate in a textbook demonstration of the insignificance, disposability, or reducibility of erasure's "*turn/trick of writing*" to the meaning it participates in delivering.

Yet Derrida's erasure is to be found there, in writing, and precisely in the statement that appears to make writing it unnecessary. The initial question remains unanswered: what difference does it make? One could describe Derrida's erasures of "is" and "thing" as parodies of Heidegger's erasure, since they stage the technique Heidegger believed essential to his philosophy (at least in *The Question of Being*) in the role of a "trick" or "gimmick" (Marshall 4; Lucy 128) essentially reducible to a more conventional (i.e., metaphysical or *phono-logocentric*) expression of the same philosophical trajectory. Yet to present this staging as parody also means concretely and visibly inscribing the denigrated technique within the expression of one or more superior alternatives, so that the affective value of parody can emerge in distinction from any of the perspectives taken "straight." This is tantamount to saying that Derrida's sentence erases its erasures—it asymmetrically (re)inscribes what is already a gesture of asymmetrical inscription—

---

[5] This is to say nothing of Derrida's assertion that the sign is also "ill-named," which I have omitted for the sake of simplicity. In fact, that appellation, which is as unnecessary to the statement's determination of the sign as "~~sign~~" as the strikethroughs printed over "is" and "thing," adds yet another "erasure" to the text in yet another dimension, since it, too, revokes the adequacy of the signs "is" and "thing" via a distinct semantic channel.

giving the multidimensional doublets constituted by Derrida's "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" a unique characteristic unseen in the work of other writers. Heidegger's "~~Being~~," like the majority of erasures proposed by commentators in their attempts to explain or extend Derrida's thinking, employs erasure's oscillating or double/crossing step within the field of influence of a sign (e.g., "Being" for Heidegger, or "sign" for Spivak) that is presumed to represent its own conceptual self-identity. In contrast, Derrida's erasures intervene in a field that is already doubled, since "is" and "thing" (i.e., without the strikethroughs Derrida adds to them) have already been marked and remarked by the sentence in which they appear. As more or less successful signifiers—that is, insofar as they communicate something to Derrida's reader—they "are" the "things" that make Derrida's assertion possible. Yet insofar as each sign must, according to that assertion, be re-determined as a "~~sign~~," it is also already withdrawn from its being a thing at all. To put "is" and "thing" under erasure in yet another dimension—in this case, that of the concrete manifestation of writing on a manuscript page—is therefore equivalent to applying the strikethroughs twice, non-simultaneously tracing their consequences for both of the already delineated trajectories of "is" and "thing."

The erasures "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~," therefore, open a dimension of meaning within the questions of the thing, the sign, and Being that neither collapses nor reifies the difference between them, but thickens the concrete scope of the problem posed by their regular differentiation. In one sense, this thickening could be conceived of as an expanding multiplicity of meanings and approaches, in that the inherent potential for any writing to be both erased and erased again means that more differences, and consequently more

difference, can always be made to appear between the subjects of ontology. Yet such a

conception would mean ignoring the way in which erasure's capacity to differentiate is

mixed with its capacity to condition and to revoke; it would mean forgetting that

Derrida's "*limitrophy*"—or "complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and

dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply"—not only leaves intact

the initial limit on which it acts, but reproduces the force of that limitation alongside the

potential to transgress it (Derrida, *Animal* 29).

In Derrida's statement that "the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that

escapes the instituting question of philosophy," the strikethroughs over "is" and "thing"

serve both functions, and in this sense they only extend the meaning of the assertion

insofar as they also constrain it. Nonetheless, and seemingly inescapably, the thickening

of meaning that results has at least two trajectories of its own. In the first place, each

strikethrough acts as what Pierre-Marc de Biasi calls "an erasure of substitution for which

the substituting segment is null [*nul*]," or for which the substitute is an ellipse (23). In this

sense, "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" both duplicate the effect of Derrida's assertion, in that they

represent the revocation of concrete signs' applicability to the ontological question of the

sign in general, and pre-emptively cancel the assertion by withdrawing the signifiers that

would allow it to become meaningful. Thus, they do not effect an accumulative

multiplication, but instead exemplify the structure of the double/cross: in the course of

reiterating the theme of the sentence to which they are applied, the erasures also turn that

theme back against the sentence itself.

However, the configuration of this double/cross, too, can be inverted. According

to Bertrand Rougé's alternate understanding of signs written under erasure, each strikethrough only indicates that something is not to be read by delimiting and marking the place of what is not to be read, meaning it ultimately posits a minimum degree of "having taken place [*avoir-eu-lieu*]" and affirms the "materiality of place [*lieu*]" ("Rature" 14). As Rougé explains, "[k]eeping the attention on that which plays *between* itself and the erased, erasure can no longer be read as the 'non-place of reading' but on the contrary the definition of a place, eventually concentrated on a very precise point, which is traced by the intersection of the branches of the X or of the cross" (Rougé, "Ponctuation" 148). If Rougé's perspective is taken up, the way in which "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" can be said to "escape" (or escape again) the question "what is…?" becomes rather different, since, instead of being merely nullified, they are substituted in their function as signs for the "materiality" or spatiality of their function as written marks. In this sense, too, however, the strikethroughs turn against the theme of Derrida's sentence even as they replicate it, since the erasures' indication of "is" and "thing" as places of non-reading, while draining them of their signifying functions, reconstitutes a kind of being or thingness in the dimension of place itself.

Erasure pluralizes the trajectories through which Derrida's sentence can be interpreted, but only by inscribing that plurality within, and therefore thickening, the reference points that precede erasure's concrete application. In this way, erasures such as "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" act as denser, more literal demonstrations of what Derrida in *Limited Inc* calls the sign's iterability, whereby any sign both remains itself and undergoes unprecedented alterations through successive repetitions. What is often lost in discussions

of iterability, however, is that "[i]teration alters" (Derrida, *Limited* 40) in such a way that it never purely differentiates itself from what it iterates, since "the structure of iteration— and this is another of its decisive traits—implies *both* identity *and* difference. Iteration in its "purest" form—and it is always impure—contains in itself the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration" (Derrida, *Limited* 53). Understood abstractly, the meaning of this "discrepancy" is often interpreted as being closer to the pole of difference, and the notion of an "impurity" that would differentiate iteration from difference itself remains difficult to conceptualize. Yet the extent of Derrida's interest in and fidelity to the relatively pragmatic philosophies of John Searle and J. L. Austin, whose ideas structure the argument of *Limited Inc* to a far greater degree than is usually acknowledged, suggest that the application of iterability to practical situations remains an indispensable focus of Derrida's ideas; as Geoffrey Bennington argues in his chapter on Derridean erasure and the *X*, which was originally prepared for a conference called "Applied Derrida," "[a]ll of Derrida's texts are already applications, so there is no separate 'Derrida' in the form of theory who might *then* be applied to something else" (90). While they are therefore not exceptional, Derrida's "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" are exemplary in his work, since their use of that singular "*turn*" or "*trick of writing* [*tour d'écriture*]" called erasure (*Grammatology* 24; translation modified; *Grammatologie* 38) pushes the reader to encounter Derridean theory's self-application to its own means of communicating. Aligning with Derrida's predictions in *Limited Inc*, this encounter reveals a dimension of differences that are inherently fraught, discrepant, and impure, together suggesting that no single analytical or critical concept of writing under erasure can

exhaust the question of what erasure concretely "is."

* * *

Just before proclaiming the "necessity" of his "*turn/trick of writing* [*tour
d'écriture*]" (*Grammatology* 24; translation modified; *Grammatologie* 38), Derrida writes
that

> within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, *all is not to
> be thought at one go* [*d'un seul trait*];[6] entity and being, ontic and
> ontological, "ontico-ontological," are, in an original style, derivative with
> regard to difference, and with respect to what I shall later call *differance*
> [*différance*], an economic concept designating the production of
> differing/deferring. (*Grammatology* 23; *Grammatologie* 38)

As I argued in chapter 1, Derrida's maxim in the first part of this statement provides an
apt summary of the motivation and accomplishment of Heidegger's erasure, "~~Being~~,"
which can be said to have introduced into the writing of ontology the doubleness that
attends Being's relationship with difference throughout his work. In this sense, any
Derridean writing under erasure—including not only those erasures Derrida wrote
himself, such as "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~," but also any erasure made under the auspices of

---

[6] For a discussion of the translation of this phrase, see chapter 1, note 16.

Derrida's theory—both extends and reinforces Heidegger's idea. A Derridean writing

under erasure would extend the theme of Heidegger's "~~Being~~" by dispersing its technique

amongst a wider variety of written signs and concepts, yet it would also reinforce that

theme by providing evidence that its scope already covers the whole of ontico-ontological

difference; after all, every sign or concept is itself an ontic being with its own ontological

Being. What is most important to Derrida, however, is that philosophy cannot synthesize

these aspects of ontico-ontological difference "*at one go*" without relegating the sense in

which the difference itself "takes place," as Rougé might put it ("Rature" 14), to an

excluded remainder. It is for this reason that Derrida prefers to extend Heidegger's

project of writing differential ontology via a "double writing" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 4)

that is perhaps best demonstrated by writing under erasure. As Rodolphe Gasché suggests

(*Tain* 225), doubling of this kind is inherent, though in different ways, to all of Derrida's

themes, including his famous notion of *différance*. Seen as a property of writing under

erasure, *différance* refers neither to an identity of deferral and differentiation nor to both

of them at the same time, but instead designates the dimensions of an economy of

production and expenditure that circulates non-simultaneously between one and the

other.[7] As with any economic process, these dimensions are inherently restricted by the

---

[7] The economy of *différance* would not be limited to what Georges Bataille calls "restricted economy," but would also participate in the dissipation of excess he attributes to "general economy." This means that the circulation of *différance* would involve a certain indefinite expenditure of resources not finally calculable according to an absolute principle of utility (Bataille 30). At the same time, Derrida's "Différance" (*Margins* 3-27) and "From Restricted to General Economy" (*Writing* 317-50) make clear that Derrida's concepts, including *différance*, do not completely reflect Bataille's privileging of the non-productive expenditure of excess in general economy; rather, the economy of *différance* would incorporate both restricted and general economies, or would mediate between them by demonstrating the interchangeability of general economies' "excess" and restricted economies' "reserve" (*Margins* 19). Joost de Bloois, in "The

finitude of what circulates within them, since it is by dint of this finitude that they are also persistently re-situated within an asymmetrical doubleness that cannot be synthesized.

Despite the almost baffling simplicity of Derrida's statement that "*all is not to be thought at one go*" (*Grammatology* 23), attempting to justify this maxim with a coherent argumentative position runs up against the very problem it is meant to evade: to provide a critical justification for the inherent incompleteness of one's own thinking means apprehending all of that thinking's trajectories at once, thus synthesizing them into a complete principle. Nonetheless, many of Derrida's most perceptive and intriguing interpreters seek to justify deconstructive philosophy by associating it with complete principles of exactly this kind. Martin Hägglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, for example, takes this pursuit to the extent of proposing a complete Derridean ontology, defining "spacing" (*espacement*, which Hägglund refers to as the "one key word in Derrida's work" [72]), according to its "ontological status" (2) as "an *absolutely general condition*" (3). If Hägglund's absolutist vocabulary seems to jar with the rejection of absolutely general or universal discourses for which Derrida is often remembered, his approach is nonetheless indebted to Gasché's earlier criticism of the tendency, most notably represented by the American "Yale School" critics, to limit deconstruction to literary studies. For Gasché in *Inventions of Difference* and *The Tain of the Mirror*, this limitation constitutes "an extraordinary blurring and toning-down of the

---

Last Instance: Deconstruction as General Economy," agrees, arguing that Derrida elaborates a reading of Bataille in which "general economy precisely exposes the two-sidedness of philosophical or scientific concepts (its debt to both restricted economy and expenditure)" (134).

critical implications of the philosopher's [Derrida's] work" (*Inventions* 25), which should

be properly understood as an argument with and about "philosophical generality" (*Tain*

2). Finally, the "ontological" or "general" application of Derrida's philosophy is exhibited

at full force in Kirby's *Quantum Anthropologies*, specifically in her understanding of the

Derridean "general text" as a "unified field" encompassing all the divergent territories of

language and material, knowledge and fact, and culture and nature (13). Perhaps most

intriguingly, Kirby's elaboration of a "unified field" is rooted in the same insistence on

doubling and the proliferation of differentiated dimensions taken up by my own model of

erasure.[8]

None of Hägglund's, Gasché's, and Kirby's attempts to establish a complete

formulation of Derrida's thought can be accepted as such; again, "within the decisive

concept of ontico-ontological difference, *all is not to be thought at one go*." It is not

enough to refer to a general system in order to understand the singular meaning of a

certain text's situation within that system. As Jeffrey T. Nealon argues in "The Discipline

of Deconstruction," deconstruction would have to proceed in a manner that "cannot be

generalized as or in a method, since it always arises from and within a specific situation,

---

[8] Kirby writes,

> If "textuality" does not originate in the atomic unity of the sign, if it is a splitting or trace whose infinite dispersal and genesis confounds all notions of dimensionality as aggregation: place *and* time, cause *and* effect, Culture *plus* its unreadable (and supposedly illiterate) outside (~~Nature~~), then the intricacies of this general writing are not just coextensive with the internal workings of Culture. […] Surely, what remains ungraspable even as it enables the questions of "language" and "who writes this text?" to be posed is that the identity and relational purchase of Nature, Culture, and their corollaries, substance and interpretation, are all alive to the same initial conditions that inform the clairvoyance of cellular communication and lightning strokes. In other words, these seemingly separate entities are the *différant* expressions of a unified field, a "general text." (13)

in the form of a specific choice" (1270). My choice (which is also well-known to deconstructionist literary critics) is to begin to unravel the problem based on what is already manifest in the texts at hand. In turn, this thinking implicates an entity that is also definitive for writing under erasure, although from a perspective I have not yet explored: the *paleonym* or "old name" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 3).

Superficially, the definition of this entity is relatively straightforward: the *paleonym* is simply the old name that is retained (at least in part) when a new concept is formulated in language. It would also be equivalent, therefore, to the "erased determination" (Derrida, *Grammatology* 24) of writing under erasure—the traditional word that remains legible while erasure attempts to indicate something beyond it—and my discussion treats the two terms interchangeably. Despite its relative simplicity, Derrida does not introduce the concept of the *paleonym* in *Dissemination* as a simple matter of fact, but as an object of interrogation; here, *paleonymy*[9] refers to "the question of the preservation of names […]. Why should an old name, for a determinate time, be retained? Why should the effects of a new meaning, concept, or object be damped by memory?" (3). Although these questions provide the opening for the expansive text of *Dissemination*, they are never directly answered in this work. Nor are they answered in the few and scattered references to *paleonymy* in Derrida's other writings, or even in the works of Derrida's interpreters. Nonetheless, I argue that in order to adequately evaluate

---

[9] The concept of *paleonymy* is rendered slightly differently in the three relatively early texts in which Derrida directly addresses it, as "*paleonymy*" in *Dissemination* (3), "*paleonomy*" in *Positions* (71), and "*paleonymics*" in "Signature Event Context" (*Limited* 21). Unlike in the case of *différance*, I have decided not to distinguish between these three spellings, instead acting as if they indeed "made no difference" (Derrida, *Margins* 3).

the significance of erasure in Derrida's texts, one must refuse to take the apparent simplicity of the *paleonym* for granted and instead interrogate the actual conditions of its operation in Derrida's thought. Most importantly, the investigation of *paleonymy* is instrumental for apprehending the relationship between "writing under erasure"—a phrase often used to describe Derrida's philosophy in general—and the specific, concrete occurrence of erasure in writing.

In the first place, the question of *paleonymy* presents one of the most persistent concrete obstacles to generalizing interpretations of Derrida's thought such as Hägglund's, Gasché's, and Kirby's. The problem is perhaps most visible in Gasché's and Kirby's fixations on establishing the dissimilarity of Derrida's "arche-writing" or "general text" from their *paleonymic* counterparts, the commonly recognized meanings of the words "writing" and "text."[10] In each case, the reader is instructed to understand Derrida's term as an entirely novel concept owing nothing to the mundane concept from which it takes its name. Moreover, the reasoning behind this instruction is clear: since "writing" and "text" in their mundane senses are defined by an essential specificity or limitation (i.e., that, at the very least, they do not encompass living speech), it would be impossible to employ either of them as the predicate of an absolutely general concept. And yet there is an obvious sense in which this reasoning, while sound, does not

---

[10] Hägglund deals with this problem more surreptitiously, by centring his depiction around a term ("spacing" or *espacement*) that appears rarely in Derrida's work and therefore presents fewer exegetical problems. Moreover, it can perhaps be said that the *paleonymic* counterpart of "spacing" comes with a more general or philosophical aura than those of Derrida's more familiar textual metaphors, which Hägglund's argument marginalizes. Yet even Hägglund's focus is faced with an obvious *paleonymic* obstacle: if "spacing" in Derrida's corpus refers precisely to "the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space" (Hägglund 3), it remains unclear why the name Derrida chose for the concept so blatantly privileges one side of its apparently symmetrical application.

adequately explain Derrida's decisions regarding the concepts' names. If "arche-writing" (to take just one example, since the same can be said of many of Derrida's concepts) is meant to differentiate itself absolutely from mundane writing, why would Derrida use the same word for both?

The structure of language provides ample resources for constructing true or at least truer neologisms, utterances much further removed from the limitations of traditional concepts than those Derrida privileges in his writing. Why, then, did Derrida not simply invent these new words himself, rather than leaving it to his interpreters to develop the counterintuitive argument that his old names actually refer to entirely new concepts? Of course, the invention of largely or totally unprecedented neologisms is inefficacious if one wants one's concepts to communicate something of their content to readers, particularly where communication takes place in a certain language defined by a certain set of conventional limitations.[11] And communication, it turns out, is exactly the point of *paleonymy*, as Derrida writes in "Signature Event Context" that "[t]o leave this new concept the old name of writing […] is to give to everything at stake in the operations of deconstruction the chance and the force, the power of *communication*" (*Limited* 21). This "force" or "power," then, also implies an inherent limitation of the generalizing trajectory Gasché and Kirby seek to ascribe to the novelty of Derrida's concepts, since "*communication*," if it is in fact undersigned by old names such as "writing" and "text," cannot in the last instance be the communication of something

---

[11] As Derrida writes in *Monolingualism of the Other*, "[t]he improvisation of some inaugurality is, without the shadow of a doubt, the impossible itself. Reappropriation always takes place" (66).

absolutely general or unlimited in the scope of its meaning. This is especially the case if,

as Derrida's interpreters tend to agree, the language in which we communicate today is

inseparable from the traditional language of a metaphysics, whose attempts to represent

absolute generality are inherently doomed to failure. As opposed to an edifice of new

constructions with unprecedented claims to generality, deconstruction would be better

conceived of as a passage out of failed generalities by way of a communicative paradigm

whose novelty is always only partial.

The *paleonym*'s appearance under erasure, then, marks the event of a singularity

within Derrida's texts, radically subverting their generalizing program without wholly

negating it. In *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure*, Nicole Anderson describes the concept of

"under erasure" as indicating a "negotiation" between the singular and the general,

calling their insistent heterogeneity a "positive paradox" (4). Anderson argues that the

singular and the general are always co-dependent structures, even when adherence to one

necessitates a disengagement from the other. In the ethical context her study identifies

with "under erasure," this means that general or universal ethical norms can never fully

account for the empirical possibility (Anderson 86) of a transgressive singular response

that would still ultimately be ethical (Anderson 4); conversely, the singular can also never

"transcend" its "retention and acknowledgment" of the general system it transgresses

(Anderson 4), since it must emerge in relation to a general system in order to maintain its

singularity.[12] For Anderson, the specific economy of this negotiation manifests in a

---

[12] Anderson clarifies that

this singular ethical response *does not* deny or reject ethics (generality), or norms and

process of modification and reinvention in which ethics is "shifting and forever changing" (86), and in this sense her ideas reflect the transformative power Derrida associates with *paleonymy* in *Positions* (71) and "Signature Event Context" (*Limited* 21).

Despite these parallels between the overall functioning of Derrida's *paleonymy* and Anderson's "under erasure," Anderson's mapping of singularity and generality onto the actual figure of the *paleonym* suggests the opposite of its effect on Derrida's neologisms, especially as they are interpreted by Gasché and Kirby. While in the latter case Derrida's *paleonyms* play the role of singularities whose narrowness disrupts the more general consequences of their erasure, for Anderson the words placed "under erasure" in Derrida's philosophy consistently stand for the normative generalities that singular events erase. This does not mean Anderson's model is invalid, since it is reasonable to read the erased word in an expression like "~~ethics~~," or even "ethics under erasure," as signifying the general conception of a normative system. However, the co-presence of both readings of the *paleonym* suggests that it cannot be defined according to a fixed analogy with what Anderson calls generality and singularity. For Gasché and Kirby, there is nothing particularly singular about the moment of erasure, since its means of suppressing the limited significations of "writing" and "text" is key to establishing "arche-writing" and "general text" as universal systems. For them, it is the *paleonym*—specifically the inherited, mundane sense of an old name—that is singular, in that it plays

values that carry universal status. This is because the singular ethical response is situated, expressed and framed within certain contexts. Given this, a singular ethical response to the Other takes place in relation to ethics and norms, which is why there is never one singular ethical response that can be applied across time and place to all situations. (142)

the role of a (textual) event that defies their systems' generalizations.

Between Anderson's representation of "under erasure" and Gasché's and Kirby's implicit struggle with Derrida's *paleonyms*, the analogy with generality and singularity undergoes a reversal. This reversal is both a doubling—actually a redoubling (an erasure of an erasure) of the generality-singularity doublet Anderson attempts to fix alongside her conception of "under erasure"—and a double-cross, since either trajectory is situated asymmetrically against its alternative. Where Anderson admits a single analogy between the doublet of a textual erasure and that of "ethics under erasure" (e.g., for "~~sign~~," "sign" is to *X* as general is to singular), my comparison of *Ethics Under Erasure* to Gasché and Kirby's "arche-writing" and "general text" allows two (e.g., "sign" is to *X* as general is to singular, or "sign" is to *X* as singular is to general). So, where Anderson doubles ethics into general and singular, my analysis also doubles general and singular: there are two general systems potentially at play (either a Derridean system or the metaphysical system preceding it), as well as two singularities (the textual, nominal, or *paleonymic* trace of either system as each would manifest against the methodological privileging of the other). Yet this does not mean that my analysis holds all four forms together at once, as in a four-part analogy; rather, because the doublets are determined non-simultaneously (e.g., the identification of Derrida's philosophy as general correlates to the identification of a metaphysical *paleonym* as singular, and this correlation cannot coincide with its alternative), the complete elaboration of their potentialities must take place over two inscriptive moments whose trajectories are separated by space and time. In other words, the four do not make a fourfold gathered together "*at one go*" (Derrida, *Grammatology*

23) but a doubled double, 2(2) or 2^2. The four possibilities can also therefore manifest only in an asymmetrical configuration: any processual consideration of all four, because it would necessitate reversing an initial analogy in order to reconfigure or reinscribe it, must mean putting one analogy before (in the sense of either time or position) the other.

The *paleonym* may be analogous to either a singular event or a general system, but not both at the same time. Moreover, this non-simultaneity means that erasure's doubling does not occur in a single moment from which critics could distance themselves, thereby guaranteeing an objective or neutral perspective on the phenomenon of erasure. Rather, those critics who write on erasure (since erasure is already writing, the writing of erasure and the *paleonym*) are implicated in its persistent doubling across each successive moment of its interpretation. Ultimately, then, the problem with Anderson's conceptualization of writing under erasure is her insistence on analogy itself, since no author's attempt to fix erasure's meaning can be finally viable. Yet this does not make such attempts inefficacious or useless endeavours, especially insofar as their "empirical-logical" consequences are foregrounded alongside their more generally "philosophical-logical" pronouncements (Derrida, *Margins* 7): while a critic's attempt to determine the meaning of the *paleonym* in general remains singularly vulnerable to reversal or erasure, that attempt also remains legible within the empirical history of erasure's elaboration. As Derrida suggests, similarly, in "Différance," the elaboration of *différance* should not be merely "philosophical," "operating according to principles, postulates, axioms or definitions," but must be "strategic and adventurous," engaging in the enduring value of empirical discovery precisely insofar as it continues to escape philosophical systematicity

(*Margins* 7).

In his description of the "operation" of *paleonymy* in *Positions*, Derrida describes

just such an engagement, wherein the *paleonym* allows philosophy and empirical reality

to work through and across each other for the purposes of intervention, transformation,

and extension. In Derrida's words,

> we proceed: (1) to the extraction of a reduced predicative trait that is held
>
> in reserve, limited in a given conceptual structure […], *named X*; (2) to the
>
> delimitation, the grafting and regulated extension of the extracted
>
> predicate, the name *X* being maintained as a kind of *lever of intervention*,
>
> in order to maintain a grasp on the previous organization, which is to be
>
> transformed effectively. Therefore, extraction, graft, extension: you know
>
> that this is what I call, according to the process I have just described,
>
> *writing*. (*Positions* 71)

The *paleonym* is thus an indispensible part of writing's finitude, or that which sutures its

novel philosophical-logical content to the inherent "regulat[ion]" of concrete texts across

the many dimensions of their empirical being. It is in this sense that Derrida's work "no

longer opposes writing to erasure" (Derrida, *Limited* 137). Rather than the simultaneous

or symmetrical configuration of singularity and generality Anderson refers to as a

"positive paradox" (4), this *paleonymic* writing represents the irreducible "pass[age]

through that erased determination" that Derrida identifies with writing's "*turn*" or "*trick*"

("*tour d'écriture*" [*Grammatology* 24; translation modified; *Grammatologie* 38]); rather

than fixing an analogy, it underwrites the capacity to produce those analogies that allow

for the "effective transformation" of ideas in concrete acts of communication. Since these passages, transformations, or "extension[s]" are always asymmetrical, they also make manifest the doubleness and reversibility of singularity, generality, and the relationship between them.

Timothy Clark summarizes this structure concisely in his analysis of Derrida's "'science' of the singular," concluding that "[t]he more [the singular thing] exemplifies singularity the less it does so, and vice versa. It is as if an alogical fractal structure were duplicating itself on both lesser and greater scales" (166).[13] Although he does not connect it directly to the question of erasure, Clark's image of an "alogical fractal structure" offers an especially compelling depiction of *paleonymy* for several reasons. In the first place, the fractal's ability to reproduce itself indefinitely in both smaller and larger dimensions speaks to the persistent, asymmetrical bidirectionality of erasure and *paleonymic* writing. Yet it also draws our attention to the visual aspect of the fractal—in other words, to its perceptible form across all scales, or what it would "look like" in a strictly experiential sense—as a component that can be neither reduced to nor recognized by any general theorization of its governing structure. This "alogical" image both escapes the logic of *paleonymy*, cutting through its conceptualization, and remains indispensible to the

---

[13] More completely, Clark explains his reasoning as follows:

> However attentive one tried to be to the singularity of a 'thing', an element of generality is inescapable. The singular event is always exemplary, its own commentary. That is to say it suggests, as an example, the paradoxial [sic] possibility of a 'singular event' in general. In fact, the thing is in a double-bind in this respect. (1) Its singularity consists in its resistance to generality, to becoming an example. Therefore one might say that the thing preserves its force by refusing to exemplify. (2) Yet one could equally well say that its singularity consists in a hyperbolic mode of exemplarity. The more it refuses to exemplify the more exemplary (of singularity) it must become. The more it exemplifies singularity the less it does so, and vice versa. (166)

duplication and extension of that logic.

In a sense, the phenomenal appearance of Clark's fractal—what it "looks like"—is exactly what is named by the old name, although the identity of this remainder is also neither stable nor complete; in my readings of Derrida's concrete erasures in *Of Grammatology*, for example, it has already taken several shifting forms including those of the signifying functions of "is" and "thing" within Derrida's pronouncement, their individual meanings as signs, their concrete appearance in the pages of *Of Grammatology*, and their material function as the site or place of the strikethroughs that erase them. Nonetheless, none of these iterations has the capacity to "alter" its meaning absolutely, according to a pure difference (Derrida, *Limited* 40). In other words, *paleonyms* remain recognizable through the transformations wrought by their being written and erased, and in this sense they exemplify the "regulat[ion]" upon which *paleonymy*'s finitude is premised (Derrida, *Positions* 71). To interact with writing under erasure "strategic[ally] and adventurous[ly]" (Derrida, *Margins* 7), then, involves not only unlocking something like a generalizing power within the singular (as Anderson pursues, and as Clark limits to merely one aspect of singularity's "double-bind") but also following the increasingly narrowing routes by which the *paleonym* "maintain[s] a grasp on the previous organization" (Derrida, *Positions* 71). As I explore below, this grasp can be tightened to the limit of phenomenological ideality, even as such an ideality at once guarantees writing's place in an irreducibly empirical history.

* * *

To "put the old names to work" (*Dissemination* 5) in a Derridean writing—

understood both neologically and *paleonymically*—involves something other than an

unlimited multiplication of pure differences. In order for the "transformation" wrought by

writing to be "effective," it must also be in certain ways "limited," so that it can

"maintain a grasp on the previous organization" (Derrida, *Positions* 71). Consequently, as

Derrida suggests in *Dissemination*,

> [t]o put the old names to work, or even just to leave them in circulation,
>
> will always, of course, involve some risk: the risk of settling down or of
>
> regressing into the system that has been, or is in the process of being,
>
> deconstructed. To deny this risk would be to confirm it: it would be to see
>
> the signifier—in this case the name—as a merely circumstantial,
>
> conventional occurrence of the concept or as a concession without any
>
> specific effect. (5)

Given that Derrida is well known for exploiting Ferdinand de Saussure's assertion that

the linguistic sign is "arbitrary," or that there is no essential relationship between signifier

and signified (de Saussure 79), Derrida's claim in the above quotation is surprising.

However, as he suggests, recognizing the "work" of signifiers (especially in their debased

state as *paleonyms*) requires a double limit excluding both de Saussure's structuralist

model and the "natural connexion [sic]" (de Saussure 79) of signifier to signified it

opposes, since both theories come with the same consequence for the signifier: whether

dismissed as irrelevant to the objects indicated by language or absorbed into those objects

by way of an essential identity, the characteristics of the signifier itself would have no

bearing on the outcome of communication. In brief, one must not presuppose "the

signifier's *simple* exteriority to 'its' concept" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 3) if one is to

understand the *paleonym* as having any role at all within the process of communication.

While Derrida is torturously vague in his descriptions of what exactly this role would be,

his statements clearly announce the spectre of a form of communication in which the

signifier would retain some inherent, though also inherently partial, contiguity or

connection with what it indicates.

  To take this spectre seriously, then, one would need to risk proceeding as if there

were a form of communication that bridged "the abyss […] between language and its

inaccessible other," as M. C. Dillon puts it (79). At the heart of his critique of

deconstruction in *Semiological Reductionism*, Dillon claims to the contrary that Derrida's

philosophy "renders all signification arbitrary" (12), that it unequivocally affirms the

"abyss" between language and non-language, and that these commitments culminate in

deconstruction's inability to respond to an almost comically simplistic demand: "One

must be able to answer the question why I identify this object as a cat rather than an

aircraft carrier" (12-13). While Dillon's challenge, from one perspective, is discredited

simply by the actual historical reach and impact of Derrida's work, I maintain that

answering his question is integral to any investigation of the scope and limitations of

Derrida's philosophy. Nonetheless, I also argue that Derrida does answer Dillon's

question, specifically as a function of his preservation of old names. What else, if not the (often) successful presupposition of the identity of a certain name and a certain object would Derrida have meant by "the power of *communication*" (*Limited* 21)?

It is true that much of Derrida's work draws attention to what Dillon calls "the play of signifiers" (10), in which the disjunctions between signifiers and signifieds, as well as those between signifiers in their own right, are leveraged into surprising transformations of speech and thought. However, it is important to heed Derrida's warnings that his ostensible affirmation of "*complete freeplay or undecidability*" has been "[g]reatly overestimated in [his] texts in the United States" (*Limited* 115) and that "[a]bove all, no completeness is possible for undecidability" (*Limited* 116). Along these lines, Derrida's "power of *communication*" (*Limited* 21) draws us toward the exact opposite of a "*complete freeplay*" of language; instead, it suggests the regulative possibility of an "absolute proximity of the signifier to the signified" (Derrida, *Speech* 80), since some form of this proximity, however imperfect, must underlie the accurate transmission of understandings between members of a linguistic community. Similarly, in *Limited Inc* Derrida affirms that the sign's iterability, in addition to allowing for the alteration of signification across successive repetitions of the signifier, also "supposes a minimal remainder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the *selfsame* be repeatable and identifiable *in*, *through*, and even *in view of* its alteration" (*Limited* 53).

The *paleonym*, insofar as it retains the ideality or "identity of the *selfsame*" that regulates writing under erasure, is therefore closely connected to one of the fundamental

themes of a philosophy Derrida is better remembered for critiquing: Husserlian

phenomenology.[14] Communication in the sense guaranteed by the *paleonym* would rely

primarily on what Husserl in his *Logical Investigation* calls the sign's meaning

(*Bedeutung*): the ideal or essential, and thus perfectly repeatable, content or sense (*Sinn*)

of an intentional expression (*Ausdruck*), which he strictly distinguishes from the sign's

acting as an indication (*Anzeichen*) of worldly objects in finite time and space. Certainly,

Derrida does not take up Husserl's theory of meaning wholesale, and some of the two

thinkers' most significant divergences pertain precisely to the issue of communication.

Where Husserl sees communication epitomized in expression (*Ausdruck*), Derrida

contends that "expression itself is never purely expression" as long as communication is

achieved, and that, in turn, "only when communication is suspended can pure expression

appear" (*Speech* 38). At the same time, the nature of these divergences—for which

Derrida's communication is more of an impurity or suspension of Husserl's than it is

something purely different—demonstrates a deep allegiance between Derrida's and

Husserl's perspectives that has not gone unnoticed by commentators. Rudolf Bernet, for

example, understands from Derrida's *Introduction* to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry" that

"Derrida takes his bearings entirely from the conceptual framework provided by this text

and Husserl's work as a whole, in particular from the separation between real (factual)

objects and ideal (essential) objects" (137). Yet one of the strongest and most intriguing

---

[14] This connection is reinforced by Norris, who asserts in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* that the interplay of Saussurean structuralism and Husserlian phenomenology is central to Derrida's philosophy. While structuralism contributes the aforementioned description of the sign as "arbitrary," phenomenology contributes "the assumption (following Husserl) that meaning was always a kind of creative *excess*, surpassing any possible account of its origin based on the notion of structure" (Norris, *Deconstruction* 52).

arguments for Derrida's fidelity to Husserl is presented by Joshua Kates, who claims that Derrida's "unsurpassingly radical reversal" of Husserlian phenomenology—the most radical of any thinker's in the phenomenological tradition—is at the same time only permitted by Derrida's "staying with Husserl's brand of phenomenology to the very end" (*Essential* xxiv). In effect, Kates argues that Derrida goes furthest beyond Husserl's philosophy precisely by remaining closest to it, retaining to the greatest possible extent the project of ideal, transcendental communication Husserl pursued throughout his career.

If Heidegger's "~~Being~~" constitutes the double/cross of Being's identity in ontology, Derrida's *paleonymy* describes the process by which any indicative entity or sign, apprehended in its identity and ideality so as to become a vehicle of communication, can be similarly exposed to both its extension and its reversal. Yet *paleonymy* does not discover in Husserl's old names an uncontaminated ideality, but an ideality already constituted by erasure; like *Of Grammatology*'s "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~," an erased *paleonym* is an erasure of an erasure, or, to use Husserl's phenomenological parlance, a reduction of a reduction. This realization comes with two important consequences. First, it greatly widens the scope of Derrida's investigation and application of *paleonymy*, which may henceforth be understood as a thickening not only of the field constituted by writing, but also of the entire concrete situation encompassing writing, the ideal meanings it can be said to express, and the infamously Husserlian "things themselves" that written characters both indicate and themselves are. Second, it suggests that the terms by which Derrida described phenomenological methodology, having gained a degree of critical distance from it that he could not have acquired in relation to his own work, may be applied again

to Derrida insofar as he is as much Husserl's double as his double-cross. Following through with Eugen Fink's recognition that the phenomenological reduction "is its own presupposition" (105), Derrida's description of the *paleonymic* logic of Husserlian phenomenology thus provides one of the most critically complete pictures of what writing under erasure both reveals and, as a revelation, is.

In a significant sense, Derrida's inheritance from Husserl is summed up by the notion that deconstruction is based on a "semiological reduction"—a term agreed upon by both Dillon and John D. Caputo ("Economy") despite their disagreement over its success. For both commentators, this means that Derrida's method involves a reduction of phenomena to the "play" (Dillon) or "work" (Caputo, "Economy") of signifiers where Husserl's "transcendental reduction" reduces to the intuitive presence of transcendental essences. There are, in fact, a variety of connections to be drawn between phenomenologists' descriptions of the transcendental reduction and deconstructionists' characterizations of "writing under erasure." Following Spivak's popular description of the erased term as "[i]naccurate yet necessary" (Translator's xiv), "writing under erasure" is almost always explained according to a tripartite model in which (1) an original term or phrase is revealed to be problematic, (2) that term is retained due to the absence of an alternative, and (3) the tension between these two motivations is meant to destabilize or transform the scene of expression generally.[15] In these terms, writing under erasure bears

---

[15] Variations of this model are suggested by scholars from diverse disciplines writing at all levels, from general dictionaries and introductions to specialized studies. To quote from just a few examples: "The use of accustomed and known concepts 'under erasure' is intended to destabilize the familiar as at one and the same time useful, necessary, inaccurate and mistaken" (Barker 204). "This practice […] was a way to put pressure on inherited philosophical categories while recognizing that the attempt to 'overcome' them

an uncanny resemblance to the means by which Husserl's philosophy attempts what it calls a phenomenological or transcendental *epoché* or bracketing, also understood as the reduction of the phenomena given to consciousness in the "natural attitude." As Husserl writes,

> [t]he annulment in question is not a transmutation of positing into counter positing, of position into negation; it is also not a transmutation into uncertain presumption, deeming possible, undecidedness, into a doubt (in any sense whatever of the word): nor indeed is anything like that within the sphere of our free choice. *Rather it is something wholly peculiar. We do not give up the positing we effected, we do not in any respect alter our conviction* which remains in itself as it is as long as we do not introduce new judgment-motives: precisely this is what we do not do. Nevertheless the positing undergoes a modification: while it in itself remains what it is, *we, so to speak, "put it out of action," we "exclude it," we "parenthesize it."* It is still there, like the parenthesized in the parentheses, like the excluded outside the context of inclusion. (*Ideas* 58-59)

For Dillon and especially Caputo ("Economy"), Derrida's "semiological reduction" constitutes a complete overhaul of Husserl's method, radically shifting its field from that of transcendental essences to the mundane texts and languages in which

---

completely was bound to fail" (Cascardi 181). "The crossing out marks the inadequacy of the terms [Derrida] uses and the fact that deconstruction cannot manage without them; it marks their untenability and their for-the-moment-at-least necessity" (Orton 39). "[Derrida's writing under erasure] served […] to dislocate the meaning of the term by forcing it into an ambiguous position between a present inscription, on the one hand, and an absent erasure, on the other" (Giotta 9). "[*S*]*ous-rature* [*under-erasure*] indicates a system that coexists within one figure with its own undoing" (DeKoven 21).

thought is expressed in written form. However, Husserl's describing his reduction by way of an analogy with writing (specifically parentheses and the act of parenthesizing) indicates a prior relationship between phenomenological practice and the worldly use of signs. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one may suggest that a descriptive phenomenology need not ultimately distinguish itself from the worldly use of language, since "[s]peech and thought […] are enveloped in each other" (*Phenomenology* 187) according to their mutual imbrication in what Merleau-Ponty later calls "the prose of the world" (*Prose*).[16] Yet this proposition, in turn, would mean negating the *Logical Investigations*' implicit claim that phenomenology's sense (*Sinn*) and expression (*Ausdruck*) should be strictly distinguished from the manifestation of phenomenological writings as practical means of linguistic indication (*Anzeichen*). As Husserl implies and Fink makes explicit, phenomenological expression is "*wholly peculiar*" (Husserl, *Ideas* 58) in the sense of being truly unprecedented, perhaps never having been "*actually performed*" by any of its critics despite their ability to quote from and analyze it (Fink 106). As opposed to the exchanges between signs and things that constitute the indicative function of practical language, expression must have the capacity to effect a unique departure from phenomena as they are normally apprehended. Along with explaining his lifelong rejection of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology,[17] Derrida's insistence on retaining this Husserlian transcendentalism is one of the primary motivations behind his attempts

---

[16] See also Claude Lefort's quotation of and commentary on Merleau-Ponty's use of this phrase in Lefort's editor's preface to *The Prose of the World* (xiii).

[17] Although they are few in number, Derrida's repudiations of Merleau-Ponty can be found in representative texts from all major stages of his career, including the *Introduction* to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry" (*Edmund Husserl's* 111-12), "Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis" (117), and *On Touching*, which includes Derrida's only extended engagement with Merleau-Ponty's work.

to counter Merleau-Ponty's "chiasm" or "intertwining" of sense and flesh (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*) with a distinctly asymmetrical expression that is not only a crossing between worlds, but also a duplication and double-cross of the world itself.

Written two decades after the 1913 publication of Husserl's *Ideas*, Fink's "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism" (which, according to Husserl's foreword to the essay, "contains no sentence which [he] could not completely accept as [his] own or openly acknowledge as [his] own conviction" [74]) offers several insights that are critical to Derrida's ultimate understanding of the reduction as both a transcendental expression and a historical fact. This is largely due to Fink's concretization of the reduction according to the historical acts of thinkers, readers, and critics: most pressingly, he claims there can be no adequate understanding of the reduction or its possible consequences prior to "*actually performing* the reduction" (106), since it "is its own presupposition insofar as it alone opens up that dimension of problems with reference to which it establishes the possibility of theoretical knowledge" (105). Even as Fink refuses to surrender phenomenology's genuinely totalizing or transcendental application, his assertions are remarkable in that they combine the traditional presentation of phenomenology's essences or Ideas as eternal with the notion that their existence is also inherently dependent on specific acts—fully localizable to particular times, places, and persons—that open the dimensions within which they transcendentally operate. Indeed, much of Fink's argument against phenomenology's critics hinges on the issue of timing, since he can defend Husserl's *Ideas* only on the basis of its concrete historical continuity with the "definitive" performance of the reduction

that came later; in Fink's words, "[w]e must stress that even today [the account of the reduction in *Ideas*] is not false in the sense of being 'incorrect,' but only that it possesses that unavoidable 'falsity' which is the property of every first exposition of the reduction, that is, it appeals to an act the performance of which is to transcend it" (106).

As Kates suggests, Derrida's study of the Idea of phenomenology in his *Introduction* to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry" does not dispute Husserl's claims to have established, definitively and systematically, the transcendental Ideas underlying the derivative or "regional" sciences for which phenomenology provides the ground. In other words, Derrida does not challenge Husserl's discovery of the world as a totality, or at least of a world on the way to totality. What he does challenge, however, is the manner in which phenomenology discovers itself, particularly the pure Idea of itself, insofar as it exists within the world. Describing the Idea of phenomenology according to the model of an "Idea in the Kantian sense," Derrida writes that "[the] evidence of the Idea as regulative possibility is absolutely exceptional in phenomenology: it has no proper content, or rather it is not evidence of the Idea's content. It is evidence only insofar as it is *finite*, i.e., here, *formal*, since the content of the infinite Idea is absent and is denied to every intuition" (*Edmund Husserl's* 139). Because Husserl "*actually performs*" the phenomenological reduction (Fink 106), because he does in fact recover the content of the world as a totality (thus constituting the "*finite*" or "*formal*" evidence Derrida speaks of), his thought anticipates completing its project by also recovering the content of its own method. Derrida refers to this completion as the *Endstiftung* or "final institution" of phenomenology. But it is precisely this *Endstiftung* that Husserl never completed and

never could have completed, since, by definition, phenomenology cannot apprehend the Idea of phenomenology. While the content of any Idea is apprehended in phenomenological expression only in its being made present to sense, such apprehension presupposes and anticipates phenomenology's Idea as a regulative possibility that remains at the margins of presence. There is thus a spacing or delay separating the formal evidence of the Idea from the determination of its content; however, since this spacing houses the plurality of actual accomplishments constituted by Husserl's grounding of the "regional" sciences, it is more accurate to say that the performance of the reduction *is* this spacing or delay (Derrida writes that it is "pure thought investigating the sense of itself as delay within philosophy" [*Edmund Husserl's* 153]). In other words, the reduction is the "*finite*" and "*formal*" extension of transcendental phenomenological practice over the course of its approach to the *Endstiftung* it never achieves.

As Kates implies in the title of his book, *Essential History*, phenomenology would be the concretely evident thickness of a "transcendental writing"[18] that traverses the double/crossing of both the essential and the inessential. Yet Kates's elaboration of this "transcendental writing" also indicates how, over the course of Derrida's "development"[19] of the reduction, it can be reconstituted as a practice applicable to numerous instances of written expression in general; indeed, where Derrida's

---

[18] While it is originally proposed by Derrida in his *Introduction* to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry," Kates positions this term at the centre of Derridean thought throughout *Essential History* and *Fielding Derrida*.
[19] For Kates, "development" concisely summarizes Derrida's duplicitous relationship with Husserlian phenomenology: Derrida's repetition and elaboration of Husserl's ideas are captured by "a first sense of development," while the "highly singular, perhaps unparalleled innovation" of Derrida's "radical reversal" of Husserl is reflected in the term's "second, stronger sense," which implies correction and transformation (*Fielding* 51).

Introduction identifies phenomenology's "delay" as a *différance* evincing "a primordial and pure consciousness of Difference" (*Edmund Husserl's* 153), his later work and career affirm the manifestation of *différance* in acts of writing traditionally excluded from phenomenology and even philosophy as a whole. What remains clearest in the *Introduction* to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry," however, is that Derrida's expression of writing as *différance* is as much a recovery of phenomenology's transcendental expression (*Ausdruck*) as its reinvention. In a significant sense, it is only another iteration of the series of erasures through which phenomenological expression is already constituted. If, for example, the reduction of Husserl's *Ideas* constitutes an erasure of the "natural attitude" on the way to the transcendental, Fink's elaboration of this theme must erase the historical fact of Husserl's writing *Ideas* so that its "falsity," while retaining its historical place in phenomenology's development, is not allowed to contaminate the reduction's more definitive manifestations (Fink 106).

Extending this series in the midst of its reversals, what Derrida adds to the phenomenological project both advances it and obliterates the essential character of its intentions. Rewritten as "transcendental writing," it is both more phenomenological and no longer phenomenology, having returned to its initially marginalized (albeit newly transformed) manifestation as a merely linguistic act of concrete indication (*Anzeichen*). Like Husserl's "things themselves," to which he returns only to turn away from them again in his pursuit of the transcendental, phenomenology is reduced to a series of *paleonyms*, old names whose ideality is preserved only insofar as it is also divided against itself. Where Husserl's *Ideas* aims to make transcendental phenomenology

communicable—that is, in the sense of opening a way to the transcendental for each of its readers—Fink recentres phenomenology's accomplishment on that of the phenomenologist who himself communicates, since the spacing or delay between the "false" (though not "incorrect") determinations of the reduction in the text of *Ideas* and the reduction's "*actual performance*" may not be traversed by everyone who reads Husserl's books (Fink 106). In turn, Derrida realizes that there is no guarantee that Husserl's later texts, Fink's commentary, or even Husserl's and Fink's historical accomplishments as phenomenologists could not be similarly falsified, since each is by itself a merely factual (i.e., inessential) entity and thus, in a broad sense, another form of writing. Yet if this is the case, then there is also no need to restrict transcendentalism to those written expressions that call themselves "phenomenological," since the word itself, like Husserl's *Ideas* in light of his later work, may always be falsified or put under erasure. Instead, the potential for transcendental communication may be ascribed to any writing that seeks, via the "power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21) that adheres even to language's most debased *paleonyms*, an ideal expression of the world from within the world itself.

* * *

By demonstrating erasure's inseparability even from the most transcendental

forms of communication, Husserl's thought exemplifies what Derrida calls "radical responsibility," a condition adherent to all communication in view of its relationship with *paleonymy*. In the first place, a phenomenology that can only approach its *Endstiftung* by repeatedly resituating itself within the very world it seeks to transcend must therefore be as erasable as the concrete texts through which it regularly takes place, giving itself to be written, read, and thought within the world of phenomena. Yet while the transcendental phenomenological project may never be completed as such or even at all, the fact that it can be understood through certain texts means that some formal evidence or concrete trace of its anticipation of completion cannot be discounted. Conversely, the meaning of these texts is not pre-given in the sense of the phenomena apprehended in the "natural attitude," but is experienced only on the condition that the desire for the transcendental remains meaningful—or, in its manifestation as a *paleonym*, legible—beneath successive erasures. What Husserlian transcendentalism exemplifies, then, is the capacity to inaugurate a new practice on the very basis of its fallibility as a transcendental project, and to give this practice form within finite and localized contexts. In his *Introduction* to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry," Derrida refers to this capacity as "a radical responsibility," elaborating its structure in Husserlian phenomenology as follows:

> The *Endstiftung* of phenomenology (phenomenology's ultimate critical legitimation: i.e., what its sense, value, and right tell us about it), then, never directly measures up to a phenomenology. At least this *Endstiftung* can give access to itself in a philosophy, insofar as it is *announced* in a concrete phenomenological evidence, in a concrete *consciousness* which is

made *responsible* for it despite the finitude of that consciousness, and insofar as it grounds transcendental historicity and transcendental intersubjectivity. Husserl's phenomenology starts from this *lived anticipation* as a radical responsibility. (*Edmund Husserl's* 141)

According to Anderson's reading of Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, responsibility manifests either as the response to a singular other (which she calls absolute ethics) or the universal recognition of all "other others" or "*tout autre*" (which she calls general ethics [14]). There is, however, cause to distinguish Anderson's notions of responsibility from the Husserlian "radical responsibility" of Derrida's *Introduction*, even if such a distinction is non-absolute: in *The Gift of Death* Derrida notes that "[the] relation between responsibility and responding is not common to all languages" (27), while his "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," presented the year after the original French publication of *The Gift of Death*, reaffirms his indebtedness to a "philosophical responsibility" based on the specifically Husserlian "necessity of posing transcendental questions" (83-84). Indeed, Husserl's "*lived anticipation*" (Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's* 141), if it maintains any congruity with the structure of response, must do so through an inverted chronology, since it acts primarily in the face of a hypothetical event (phenomenology's *Endstiftung*) that would only occur afterward. In one sense, the structure of Husserl's transcendental reduction can be understood as a double response, positioned in between its anticipated *Endstiftung* on one end and the phenomena already apprehended in the "natural attitude" on the other. Yet it would be insufficient to characterize this double relationship, as Anderson does, as a "positive paradox"

encompassing the mutually exclusive poles of singularity and generality (4), since the phenomenological reduction is instead marked by incessant criss-crossing between these and other categorizes. Whether one frames the history of the reduction as a crossing from the singular thing to the general essence, from the general experience of mundane reality to the genuine singularity of the "thing itself," from the singular tradition of "phenomenology" to the unlimited potential of writing in general, or from the generality of the world's transcendence to the singularity of a *paleonym*, one situates oneself asymmetrically along the concrete extension of a certain trajectory. Less a response than an expression, then, responsibility can be described as the finitude of this double situation insofar as that finitude also underlies the pluralization or thickening of its potentialities.

While the ideal of responsible action remains motivated by a certain kind of transcendentalism, or what Anderson would likely refer to as "ethics" in both its singular and general applications, one also needs to take responsibility for performing the action in fact. This is why Derrida suggests in *The Gift of Death* that "the activating of responsibility (decision, act, praxis) will always take place before and beyond any theoretical or thematic determination. It will have to decide without it, independently from knowledge" (24). Thomas Keenan is thus correct in suggesting that responsibility "comes with […] the withdrawal of the rules or the knowledge on which we might rely to make our decisions for us"; however, it is misleading to add, as he does, that responsibility also "comes with […n]o grounds" (1). Clearly, his description retains at least one element that would still ground our responsibility, at least in a practical if not an ideal sense: this ground would be "us," "we" who are held responsible for "our decision."

Even as responsibility both misses its essential or ideal fulfilment and constitutively

rejects its absolute impossibility (i.e., the condition under which all acts would be purely

and equally irresponsible by default), the site at which responsibility "takes place"—the

intersection of its double/crossing—remains fixed on the individual held responsible for

its activation. And although this "taking place" has no final or definitive meaning, being

by definition bound up in its asymmetrical exposure to plurality and reversibility, it is

significant in that its extension in finite space and time carries historical consequences.

Keenan's "we" cannot become an object of reflexive self-knowledge, since its approach

toward the apprehension of its own essence is subject to the same indefinite deferral as

phenomenology's recovery of its own Idea. For the same reason, however, it also remains

itself "*in*, *through*, and even *in view of* its alteration" (Derrida, *Limited* 53) in space and

time, operating empirically as a "*finite*" or "*formal*" evidence (Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's*

139). Like what Kates calls the "phenomenological voice," it acts as a "radical

simulacrum of self-expression and self-proximity" (*Essential* xxvi-xxvii); it is thus both a

phenomenon and phenomenological (Kates, *Essential* xxvi-xxvii), although never in the

exact sense according to which it simulates itself.[20]

    When Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology* that "[w]e must begin *wherever we are*

---

[20] Similarily, Derrida in *The Gift of Death* defines responsibility in terms of one's failure to completely grasp one's own situation in the world, especially insofar as the resultant gap in self-perception is observable to others or the Other, God. Derrida writes,

        God looks at me and I don't see him and it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out
        [*ce regard qui me regarde*] that my responsibility comes into being. Thus is instituted or
        revealed the "it concerns me" or "it's my lookout" [*ça me regarde*] that leads me to say
        "it is my business, my affair, my responsibility" […] there where I cannot preempt by my
        own initiative whatever is commanding me to make decisions, decisions that will
        nevertheless be mine and which I alone will have to answer for. (*Gift* 91)

[…]: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be" (162), he does not only position deconstruction as the response to a text that comes before it (i.e., in time as well as space, in the sense of being "before one's eyes"); "belief" and its inherent fallibility are equally crucial, in that they represent the conditions under which one takes responsibility for an analysis that otherwise proceeds solely from external coordinates. It is only because one believes in "the power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21)—in other words, that the text before one's eyes means or expresses something beyond what it has already accomplished empirically and historically—that one can follow its implications to any form of critical response or development. Moreover, is it also the case that one's belief, given that it is itself only an empirical and historical accomplishment, may be falsified or erased in the course of future attempts at meaning. If I have suggested that this situation is inherent to transcendental communication, that category would thus also have to encompass reading in all but its most instrumental senses, since to read is also to inscribe oneself in the series of selections and expressions that make up history's extension beyond what is given in advance.

Yet the *paleonym* and writing under erasure constitute both the most thorough and the most concise demonstrations of responsibility, as well as the means by which it underlies transcendental expression's "taking place" in and as a double/cross. Like any sign whose use is not purely pragmatic, a *paleonym* banks on "the power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21), in part functioning in anticipation of an inalterable identity with its meaning; it is only because "is" and "thing" can potentially direct their reader to the essential characteristics of being and thinghood that one would

endeavour to write them at all. Unlike most writing, however, writing under erasure activates the falsifiability of this anticipation within the same space and time as its presentation. Rather than allowing the *paleonym*'s transcendental power to compound with that of other signs over the duration of the author's speech, erasure restricts that power to the span of its concrete evidence and excises it from communication, doing so, moreover, as a function of the author's overall intention. Rend(er)ed as "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~," the transcendental trajectories of "is" and "thing" are turned back in advance, even as the "*finite*" or "*formal*" evidence (Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's* 139) of their anticipation (a kind of perverse anticipation of their failure to transcend their own facticity) remains prominent. The result is that "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" at once signify and constitute a responsibility stripped of any enduring affirmation of what it remains accountable for, "taking place" empirically and transcendentally without following through on the transcendental project that nonetheless provides their only justification.

Like the phenomenological reduction, an erasure "is its own presupposition" (Fink 105); having distanced itself from its origin without having guaranteed its *Endstiftung*, it manifests as a uniquely ungrounded phenomenon. Unlike Fink, however, Derrida recognizes that such a phenomenon's imbrication with the empirical world, regardless of its success at beginning to transcend what is pre-given in that world, requires one to recognize that it may always fall short of the meaning it intends. By accelerating and amplifying that eventuality, the strikethroughs in "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~" expose their *paleonym*s as immediately presupposing a no-thing (and non-being) whose manifestation (strangely, a kind of being and thinghood in its own right) nevertheless

cannot be excised from Derrida's sentence without ignoring the more nuanced

dimensions of its meaning. To "begin […] to think that the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~,

the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: 'what is…?'"

(*Grammatology* 18-19) therefore means more than affirming the erasability of writing in

general.[21] While such an affirmation is viable in itself,[22] it does not allow us to dismiss

the fact that something else happens under erasure: namely, the facticity of the old name's

debased yet legible transcendental trajectory. To take the *paleonym* seriously alongside its

erasability, one must acknowledge that erasure only occurs in a language already on its

way to becoming transcendental.

All of Derrida's "transcendental writing" is a writing of responsibility. However,

writing under erasure—specifically as it manifests in concrete, graphical gestures such as

Of Grammatology's "~~is~~" and "~~thing~~"—is among those elements that are singularly

responsible for communicating the experience of responsibility within Derrida's oeuvre.

Even if expressions such as "*différance*" and "trace" emphasize the doubleness that

characterizes their functioning as philosophical concepts, their ability, in actual practice,

to be spoken, cited, or spoken again with the same intended meaning allows Derrida's

---

[21] Nonetheless, Derrida does stress the fact of writing's erasability throughout his studies of writing and the archive, frequently asserting that any material inscription of language is inherently vulnerable to destruction. In "Typewriter Ribbon," for example, the simultaneous distinction and continuity between the singular force of a writing's meaning and its fundamental effaceability is exemplified by a single manuscript page from the *cahier* of Rousseau's *Confessions*: on this page, Rousseau's appeal for the eternal preservation of his document appears directly beside the "illegible traces" of additional lines that were, in fact and for all future readers, destroyed (Derrida, "Typewriter" 145). The contrast, in this and many other investigations of the archive, serves to affirm that the *cahier* or "body of inscriptions" remains that "without which the revelation of the truth itself, however unconditional, truthful, sincere it may be in its promised manifestation, would have no chance of coming about and would be in its turn compromised" (Derrida, "Typewriter" 146).
[22] As Derrida suggests, perhaps half-jokingly, "*différance* ~~is~~ (and I also cross out the '~~is~~')" (*Margins* 6).

readers to exempt themselves from responsibility's double/cross. Such a practice, of course, is far from uncommon, especially judging by the more or less unproblematized presentation of these expressions as complete concepts in philosophical dictionaries. But as benign as it may seem to define Derrida's words in such a way that they can be apprehended consistently across his oeuvre, it runs directly counter to his insistence that *différance*, for example, "is neither a word nor a concept" (*Margins* 3). When Derrida writes this, as when he writes that "one may always act as if [the misspelling of *différence* as *différance*] made no difference [*différence*]" (*Margins* 3; *Marges* 3), he admits that the only recognizable word he has used is in fact an old name, difference, which appears only on the condition that it anticipates its meaning's completion in a metaphysical system. Moreover, there is no question that Derrida admits his responsibility for this use, or for communicating the regulative ideal of "difference" even in the midst of its deconstruction. Yet Derrida's misspelling of "*différence*," despite his stated intentions, tends to be granted the role of a complete substitute for the older concept from which it is derived (as if *différance* were absolutely non-transcendental, which amounts to the same as its being transcendental), and it is in contrast to this tendency that writing under erasure more thoroughly precludes the risk of forgetting the transcendental responsibility of its *paleonym*. While *différance* (especially in the translational context that exploits its unique pronunciation in English) risks allowing a quasi-word to be taken up as its own concept, an erasure gives nothing to read except a *paleonym*—an old name already decoupled from its conceptualizing power.

It cannot be overstated that my distinction between writing under erasure and

Derrida's other communicative tactics is a purely historical and empirical one: what makes writing under erasure an exemplary exhibition of responsibility is not any conceptual difference between, for example, "i̶s̶" or "t̶h̶i̶n̶g̶" and *différance*, but only the observable tendency to interpret the *paleonymic* components of the expressions differently. At the same time, Derrida's analysis of the "concrete phenomenological evidence" of phenomenology's regulative Idea confirms that such an empirical, factual, or incompletely idealized difference is precisely the condition of responsibility, and it is therefore entirely appropriate for purely factual differences—for example, the empirical distinction between "i̶s̶" or "t̶h̶i̶n̶g̶" and *différance*, or the distinction between "*différence*" and "*différance*" insofar as it "remains purely graphic" (Derrida, *Margins* 3)—to be held responsible for the distinct projections of ideality they motivate. As Derrida suggests, "to take factuality seriously as such is no longer to return to empiricism or nonphilosophy. On the contrary, it completes philosophy" (*Edmund Husserl's* 151). If this is the case, the analysis of Derrida's philosophy would be incomplete without the acknowledgment that the concrete manifestation of writing under erasure is particularly responsible for the presentation of philosophical responsibility in Derrida's texts. Writing under erasure is not only the tenor for a certain metaphor of responsibility, but also the most empirically consistent vehicle for the experience or phenomenon of responsibility. Finally, this fact is as much a part of responsibility's meaning as the enduring desire for an ideal responsibility that would transcend it.

When Derrida writes that "the sign i̶s̶ that ill-named t̶h̶i̶n̶g̶, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy" (*Grammatology* 19), he is as responsible

for communicating the ontological senses of "is" and "thing" as Heidegger is for

employing "Being" as a "transcendental word" (Derrida, *Grammatology* 20), even as

both challenge the adequacy of any presumably transcendental expression. Since this

duplicity appears to constitute a performative contradiction, it is often used to critique the

philosophical efficacy of both writing under erasure and the broader Heideggerian and

Derridean traditions that employ it. For example, Graham Priest's *Beyond the Limits of

Thought* asserts that

> Heidegger's arguments would appear to present him with a problem that is
>
> all too evident. He has shown that being is such that one cannot say
>
> anything about it. Yet it is clear that one can say things about it. […]
>
> Whether one likes it or not, even '~~being~~' appears to refer to being—or how
>
> are we to understand what Heidegger is on about? […E]ven if one tries to
>
> use a non-standard form of language, the standard form of language *did*
>
> express what could not be expressed. (245)

These arguments can be easily brought to bear on Derrida's writing under erasure, as

Priest implies when he concludes that, in general, poetic, metaphorical, and allegorical

means of attending to the inexpressible "don't work" (246). What Priest fails to grasp,

however, is that writing under erasure is not an attempt to replace the understanding that

being can be expressed with the understanding that it cannot; rather, erasure's strategy is

to expose the success of transcendental expression (e.g., that we do "understand what

Heidegger is on about" when he employs "being" as a *paleonym*) to the facticity of that

success—in other words, to its erasability.

Unlike taking up a position, this ex-position takes time; in Rapaport's explication of Derrida's "time of the thesis," it "takes its time as a gradual unfolding of arguments that takes place in and as real time" (262). One may also say that it takes up space or "takes place" as the spacing of written pages, the thickness of a book or sheaf (as Derrida describes *différance* [*Margins* 3]), or the thickening of the line (both literal and communicative) that comes with inscribing an old name under the diacritical supplement of a strikethrough. But this cannot be an infinite thickening resulting in a pure relativism, since it is also localized to someone's taking responsibility; in other words, the "time of the thesis" is not just any or all time, but "the real time that is Derrida's intellectual career" (Rapaport 263). Responsibility "happens urgently in the here and now," as Anderson suggests (16), yet it is also true that the *Augenblick*, Husserl's figure for the essential singularity of the present moment, has a duration (Marrati 72).

It is in this sense, finally, that Derrida claims to "get around [*contourner*]" the determination of the sign's essence (*Grammatology* 18-19; *Grammatologie* 31) via what he calls a "turn" or "trick of writing [*tour d'écriture*]" (*Grammatology* 23-24; translation modified; *Grammatologie* 38): erasure. According to Rapaport, the turn (*le tour*) is neither a "no-thesis" nor a simple reversal resulting in a renewed "foundational thesis" (262), but a series of turns toward and away from that constitutes an asymmetrical displacement, specifically of the "real time" (e.g., of a career) and space (e.g., of a sheaf of writing) that makes up the spacing of presence. One might say the turn "gets around," extending itself into a detour (*détour*) that neither replicates nor overturns the disjunction between its phenomenal origins and its (indefinitely deferred) transcendental destination,

but instead invents its own essential history.

The analysis of *paleonymy* and radical responsibility demonstrates that Derrida's philosophy is based only in part on the ultimate failure of transcendental essences and meanings to be known absolutely; for "writing under erasure" to be viable, Derrida's arguments must also take responsibility for the success of transcendental meaning, however falsifiable, within a "text where we already believe ourselves to be" (Derrida, *Grammatology* 162). Without this double writing, there is no way of striking the balance between facticity and ideality that underlies the "power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21). To attend only to facticity would mean levelling all means of speaking or writing about the world—rational and nonsensical, consistent and contradictory—to the same standard of value, thus inaugurating a pure empiricism with no specific role for philosophical or scientific inquiry. It would mean blinding oneself to the fact that, as Dillon puts it, "[s]omething *is* lost in reducing transcendence to a meaning constituted within the sphere of immanence" (5). Yet to attend only to ideality would mean condemning the empirical richness of everything that does not conform to one's ideals to the abyss of an absolute alterity, and from the perspective of a philosophy that seeks to describe the world in its totality, such an action could only be profoundly irresponsible. Attention must be paid in both directions, specifically in the form of the chiasmic double gesture of writing under erasure. On one hand, empirical reality must be reduced to an expression whose content is an actually communicated ideal meaning; on the other, that expression must be erased insofar as its transcendence only manifests in a "concrete phenomenological evidence," as writing (Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's* 141).

Despite the complexity of these formulations, what is perhaps most remarkable about *paleonymy* is not its novelty, but its familiarity. The way in which Derrida introduces radically new concepts to philosophy through the figures of writing and text, as Gasché and Kirby stress, is only part of the story; at least equally important is the fact that the "*actual performance*" (Fink 106) of philosophy was always determined by the concrete senses of "writing" and "text" already recognized by everyone. This observation is not only empirically true (i.e., there is no empirically credible counter-hypothesis to the notion that all philosophical meaning instituted before the present generation has been passed down to us in the form of writing)[23] but also must be true in order for there to be a transcendence immanent to the world in the sense demonstrated by Husserl and Fink. One must keep in mind both the meaning and the fact of writing, specifically a writing that is also erasable and, furthermore, already an erasure. One must attend, therefore, to writing's turns—to its tricks and tours, to the time and space it takes up and passes through.

At the same time, in turning my attention to the old name (and the old names) of writing under erasure, and especially in employing it to shore up my own "power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21), I am myself responsible for a form of expression that seeks to transcend time and space; in short, I have anticipated a meaning of "writing" that would survive the erasure of any concrete writing. In fact, all of the assertions I have

---

[23] While it is true that affirming this hypothesis necessitates broadening the meaning of "writing" to non-linguistic forms of technological inscription (e.g., audio recording) and biological inscription (e.g., memory), these forms of inscription are persuasively associated with "writing" throughout Derrida's oeuvre. What is significant is that, despite this broadening, the sphere of "writing" remains limited in a way that generalizing interpretations of deconstruction (especially Kirby's "general text") seek to jettison, since it would not encompass pre-deconstructive experiences of pure content or meaning.

elaborated are underpinned by a certain form of *paleonymic* transcendentalism, according to which I have assumed that words such as "erasure" and "responsibility" convey identical meanings across their various iterations. Even to the extent that I have tried to "develop" (in Kates's parlance) these meanings, there is no question of my reliance on their enduring legibility. As both Derrida and Keenan assert, I cannot turn to any knowledge or rule to justify my assumptions, and in this sense I am responsible for what my *paleonyms* represent both concretely and ideally. Nonetheless, it is only by way of the *paleonym*—an entity perhaps not unlike "[t]he ideality of the literary object" of Derrida's earliest work, as he recalls in "Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis" (116)—that I am able to situate my writing in a world marked by plurality at every dimension.

Chapter 3

Responsible for "Nothing": Cage's and Mac Low's Proto-erasures as

Negative Theology

Regardless of its coherence within *Difference and Repetition*'s overall argument,

Deleuze's complaint that Heidegger's "~~Being~~" "encouraged […] misunderstandings" of

his treatment of negation (*Difference* 66) accurately prefigures the overhasty and

inconsistent readings of writing under erasure that have since followed the technique

through Derrida's oeuvre. While commentators' accounts of the underlying principle

behind both Heidegger's and Derrida's erasures vary considerably (sometimes to the

point of being mutually contradictory), the majority of these readings share a basic

strategy of instrumentalizing and ultimately marginalizing erasure itself. Taken to its

conclusions, the results of this instrumentalization repeatedly validate Deleuze's warning

that "crossing out" may be no more than a renewed affirmation of identity, since, in the

views of these commentators, writing under erasure is supposed to demonstrate an ideal

and self-identical philosophical position—even when, paradoxically, that position

proclaims the radical imbrication of ideality with the incessant transformations of

material history.

In the preceding chapters, I tried to show that this approach fundamentally ignores

the literal or graphical manifestation of erasure in Heidegger's and Derrida's texts, and

especially its contribution to the experiences of reading and writing these texts. More

than Deleuze's dismissal of the conceptual implications of Heidegger's understanding of erasure, Heidegger's actually writing "~~Being~~" in a letter to Ernst Jünger embodies the ongoing challenges to identity, ideality, and representation that Deleuze formulates in *Difference and Repetition*, and which Heidegger and Derrida both explored in different ways throughout their careers. Through the material act of writing, Heidegger thickens differential ontology: recognizing that philosophical thought remains entangled with the representational function of communicative language, his text emerges on the way to difference without striving to render its doubleness entirely illegible. Meanwhile, Derrida's transfer of the strikethrough away from Heidegger's "master-word" (usually to the more covert signifier "is" [Spivak, Translator's xv]) does not radicalize Heidegger's critique of metaphysical identity so much as it situates authentic Being within the plurality of experiences—both real and ideal—thematized by Husserlian phenomenology. While logically exposing the eraseability of Husserl's transcendental ideas—literally, their inextricability from a concrete writing that can always be destroyed—Derrida employs textual erasures to extend the series of reversible yet always unequal asymmetries inscribed within his own discourse. To read a text such as *Of Grammatology*, then, means neither to recover the ideality of transcendental origins nor to experience the irrecoverable dissolution of origins in the ecstatic Difference of Being. Rather, Derrida's writing under erasure ranges over a finite series of double/crossings for which he, as author and signatory of the resulting texts, is uniquely responsible.

As a background to the present chapter, the Derridean theorization of responsibility underpins my assessments of, and interventions into, the legacies of John

Cage and Jackson Mac Low, whose literary work is the focus of the following pages. In sharp contrast to my notion of responsibility as a functional consistency or coherency organizing the relationships between authorial intention and concrete manifestation, Cage and Mac Low consistently project an image of literature in which value is concentrated at one pole or the other. This is to say that in Cage and Mac Low's conception of literary meaning, Barthes's "birth of the reader" equates to his "death of the Author" in rather unequivocal terms (148). Significantly, twenty-first-century critical efforts in the vein of Marjorie Perloff's "John Cage as Conceptualist Poet" tend to ignore the failings and eccentricities of this approach while inflating its most extreme implications, rebranding Cage and Mac Low as the advance guard of the contemporary Conceptualist movement's crusade against originality, expression, and the "lyrical interference of the ego" diagnosed by Charles Olson (Perloff, "John" 20). While I do not address Perloff's position explicitly, my criticism of her insistence on strict polarities and absolute principles of literary innovation should be apparent in the undercurrent of my ensuing analysis. In short, responsibility, especially as it represented by the nuanced series of reversals and inscriptions that manifest in erasure, introduces a concrete thickness to the facticity of authorship, which Perloff cannot systematize without violently excluding her system's remainder.

In the following, I attempt to elucidate my argument by way of a critical reading of Cage and Mac Low's poetics of "chance operations," by means of which they produced their literary and artistic works bearing the closest resemblance to the material practice of later erasure poetry, and the critical tradition through which their ideas are

interpreted today. I begin with readings of Cage and Mac Low's beliefs and overall

methodologies, followed by a discussion of how their concerns come to the fore in the

proto-erasure practices of Cage's "Empty Words" and Mac Low's "biblical poems." Next,

I pursue my critical assessment of Cage and Mac Low's work with reference to a

philosophical discourse whose similarity to theirs is often mentioned but rarely discussed

in detail: negative theology.[1] After developing a novel analysis of Derrida and Jean-Luc

Marion's debate over negative theology in the context of poststructuralist theory, I apply

this analysis to Cage and Mac Low's literary work as an analogous case, concluding that,

like Marion, Cage and Mac Low fail to draw attention to the way in which the distinction

between a text's meaning and its concrete manifestation or performance produces an

indefinitely thickened proliferation of interpretive trajectories. While the concrete results

of Cage and Mac Low's aesthetic strategies, especially later in their careers, offer some

possibilities for reading beyond the binary economy of intention and material, I suggest

that such an exploration is unlikely to follow from the conventional critical reception of

their work and, by implication, that of other artists in the American avant-garde tradition

they exemplify.

Although my turn to negative theology is to some extent digressive, it is germane

to my discussion of Cage and Mac Low's connection to erasure for several reasons. First,

since some of the least critical receptions of Mac Low's and (especially) Cage's writings

---

[1] Many critics, including Marion and Derrida themselves, have admitted that the use of the term "negative" to designate this style of thought is suspect; nonetheless I maintain it, as they do, to designate those approaches commonly referred to as "negative theologies." It should be clear below that disagreement over the precise meaning and scope of "negation" or "negativity" is a central component of the debate around negative theology in general.

have centred their praise on its accord with prominent philosophical discourses, it is productive to consider how philosophy also provides examples of reasoning that can be used to critique Cage's principles. Second, because Derrida's argument against Marion's negative theology—which, in *God Without Being*, is figured by Marion's crossing out the word "God"—is closely connected to his use of the strikethrough and writing under erasure, analyzing Cage and Mac Low's work through this debate offers valuable insights into their kinship with and distance from Derridean and later literary erasures. Finally, because Cage and Mac Low's poetics, Marion's negative theology, and Derrida's deconstruction are frequently presented as analogous methods with no significant differences,[2] reviewing the distinctions between them with reference to writing under erasure allows me to elucidate some of the key points most often missed by critics. To a great extent, the exchanges and excesses of philosophy and literature (and even theology, insofar as its questions of presence and faith escape disciplinary philosophy's orbit) are precisely what is at stake in writing under erasure, and it is difficult to imagine an analysis that would effectively recognize the technique's distinctiveness without engaging the vibrancy and density of their crossings.

＊ ＊ ＊

---

[2] Mikhail Epstein's "'   '" (whose title and topic is a blank space framed by quotation marks) is exemplary in this regard in that it invokes Derrida's philosophy to propose a "negative semiotics," which would be explicitly modeled on negative theology and of which Cage's musical compositions would be a privileged example. While few texts discuss all three of these discourses prominently, Cage and Mac Low's chance-based poetics and negative theology are often invoked as examples of each other, and both are frequently referred to as forms of deconstruction.

On an immediate level, it is clear that Heidegger and Derrida's writing under erasure resembles the experimental writing of Cage and Mac Low via their shared concern for the visual and concrete manifestation of language. However, the latter two literary authors also directly linked their techniques to philosophical concerns in the broad sense of the term—that is, explicit, non-fictional positions on issues such as ethics, the mind, and metaphysical reality. Following Cage's and Mac Low's own explanations and justifications of their artistic practices, which are numerous and (especially due to the difficulty of reading their literary work in a straightforward sense) frequently cited, most commentaries stress the role of the authors' interpretations of Buddhist, Daoist, and anarchist thought as direct motivations for their use of appropriation-based writing techniques.

Both Cage—whose fame derives mostly from musical compositions like the silent work *4'33"*, though his later written work is also highly regarded—and Mac Low—a student of Cage who first introduced his mentor's chance-based methods to poetic writing—share similar philosophical and religious beliefs, and both are closely associated with the use of experimental techniques based on Cage's "chance operations" and "indeterminacy."[3] As Mac Low indicates in an extended reflection on Cage's work—

---

[3] Many commentators stress the distinction between these two techniques: strictly, "chance operations" are techniques for composing works using random procedures, while "indeterminacy" refers to the unpredictable consequences of allowing for variation or improvisation in the performance or reception of a work. An example of chance operations would be Cage's composing the score for *Music of Changes* by comparing the results of coin tosses to numerical systems found in the *I Ching* (a classical Chinese

though he is also, to a great extent, speaking from his own experience—the relationship

between belief and technique in Cage's work is almost directly causal. Mac Low writes

that

> Cage often called the use of chance operations and the composition of
>
> works indeterminate as to performance "skillful means" (Sanskrit: *upaya*,
>
> a Buddhist term for means employed by Bodhisattvas to help all sentient
>
> beings attain enlightenment). I think he viewed the experiences of
>
> composing, performing, and hearing such works as being equally
>
> conducive to the arousal of *prajña*—intuitive wisdom/energy, the
>
> essence/seed of the enlightened state—by allowing the experience of
>
> sounds as perceived in themselves, "in their suchness," rather than as
>
> means of communication, expression, or emotional arousal or as
>
> subordinate elements in a structure.
>
> These considerations are as relevant to his writing as to his music
>
> […]. ("Cage's Writings" 211)

In brief, Cage and Mac Low developed chance-based compositional techniques in order

to align their experiences of music and writing with three ideals of ethical and

---

divination text); meanwhile, an example of indeterminacy would be the unpredictability of the ambient
noises that accompany performances of *4'33"*. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to speak of these techniques
together, since their essential purpose is the same; as Denis Lejeune's analysis of Cage's career exemplifies,
the distinction is enforced mainly to evaluate the techniques' varying degrees of success at achieving this
common purpose, not to indicate different purposes. Mac Low echoes this sentiment; quoting Cage, he
writes,

> What writing-through (or reading-through) methods have in common with chance
> operations is that both involve a large degree of non-intentionality, "diminish[ing] the
> value-judg[ing] activity of the ego and . . . increas[ing] the activity that accepts the rest of
> creation" […]. ("Cage's Writings" 226)

enlightened living: the Daoist principle of *wuwei* or "standing out of the way," which meant diminishing the impact of the individual self or ego on the surrounding world; the Buddhist worldview of nondualism, which translated into the absence of a true distinction between subject and object;[4] and the anarchist belief in the illegitimacy of authority, which extended to the traditional authority of the author of a literary or artistic work to determine the conditions of an audience's engagement with it.[5] Taken together, these ideals drove Cage and Mac Low to create what have been called non-egoic artworks, or artworks in which authorial intention and subjective, communicable meaning are to the greatest possible extent supplanted by the impersonal experience (on the part of both author and reader) of things as they are and the world as it is.

Denis Lejeune's *The Radical Use of Chance in 20th Century Art* is right in suggesting that, for Cage, "[c]hance was therefore not as significant in itself as in what it rejected" (191): chance offered Cage and Mac Low a consistent means of displacing authorial control in favour of more natural or at least less controllable compositional mechanisms. This explains why the technical impossibility of actualizing a composition owed purely to chance,[6] or even of defining "chance" in a manner sufficient for the

---

[4] See Jonathan Stalling's "'Listen and Relate'" for a detailed analysis of the contributions of Daoist and Buddhist thought to Mac Low's poetics. Stalling is one of the few writers to distinguish between the two spiritualities in regard to Cage's or Mac Low's influences.

[5] See Dani Spinosa and Lejeune for analyses of the connection between anarchism and the critique of authorship in Mac Low and Cage, respectively.

[6] Mac Low is especially careful to note that neither his nor Cage's "chance operations" refer to a purely non-intentional method based entirely on "just anything that came along" ("Cage's Writings" 230). Logically, the presence of factors such the author's choice of procedure, the adherence of the author's name to the work at the time of its reception, and even the author's decision to create a chance-based artwork in the first place—in short, factors necessary for an object identifiable as an artwork "by" Cage or Mac Low to manifest at all—means that some of the processes involved with the use of "chance operations" are not, in fact, left up to chance. Mac Low himself calls attention to this paradox by suggesting that many of his

pursuit of such a composition, did not discourage Cage and Mac Low's project; instead, it helped spawn a variety of techniques bivalently linked to the "stance of neutrality, passivity, and negation" Moira Roth calls the "aesthetic of indifference" (Perloff, "Watchman" 203) and the Buddhist faith in an enlightened experience of reality—that is, as wholly material, unburdened by subjective processes of meaning-making, and constituted exclusively in the present moment.

Both of these motivations are intermingled with the project of chance-based composition throughout Cage and Mac Low's work, and their relationship is fundamental to the extension of chance operations to appropriation and erasure in the authors' literary pursuits. Among the most important elaborations of these themes in the authors' statements of poetics are Cage's depictions of silence, which provides him with an ideal figure for combining his total negation of external intellectual and political influences with his unconditional affirmation of the fullness of the present moment. In the 1958 lecture "Composition as Process," Cage writes that silence, when it is not merely serving the "tasteful arrangement," "expressivity," or "architecture" of sounded notes,

> becomes something else—not silence at all, but sounds, the ambient sounds. The nature of these is unpredictable and changing. These sounds (which are called silence only because they do not form part of a musical intention) may be depended upon to exist. The world teems with them, and is, in fact, at no point free of them. (*Silence* 22-23)

procedures, usually described as chance operations by readers, should rather be called "deterministic methods" (*Thing* xxx).

These ideas, which are repeated across Cage's lectures and writings, establish the theme

of blank or silent works such as *4'33"* in fairly certain terms. The twofold aim of such

works would be (first) to undermine the reliance on subjective intention and meaning on

the parts of both the composer and the audience, and then (second) to transform the

resulting void into the opening to a world that is more valuable insofar as it is insistently

present (e.g., in that "[e]ach moment is absolute, alive and significant" [Cage, *Silence*

113]) and known via physical rather than intellectual sensation (e.g., in that "putting the

mind on it takes the ear off it" [Cage, *Silence* 116]). Silence and chance—along with the

later literary technique of erasure by "writing-through" that incorporates both—would be

useful primarily as vehicles on this journey of enlightenment.

Although it may appear difficult to realize the effect of a music hall's ambient

noise in the medium of printed literature, Cage and Mac Low's innovations in

experimental writing reveal a variety of ways to make the translation surprisingly

seamless. In the first place, and more foundationally than they make use of erasure as

such, both writers employ techniques to emphasize the role of sensory experience in

reading and other forms of textual reception. Cage's lectures—which became

increasingly unorthodox as his career progressed—present the most obvious use of these

techniques: Cage writes in the foreword to *Silence* that he often structured his lectures in

ways that would "permit the listener to experience what [he] had to say rather than just

hear about it" (ix). In practice, this meant using chance operations and artificial

prescriptions to structure the delivery of his lectures, with effects that ranged from being

almost unnoticeable (as when Cage "sometimes add[ed] by chance operations indications

of when, in the course of the performance, [he was] obliged to light a cigarette" [Cage, *Silence* 41]) to significantly disrupting normal communication (as in "Indeterminacy," in which each of the anecdotes that make up the lecture is to be told over the span of one minute, despite large variances in their lengths as texts [Cage, *Silence* 260]). If these presentations prove their kinship with sound poetry by blending writing with performance art and music, Cage also has no trouble invoking the sensory effects of visual poetics by manipulating the appearance of text on the page, most notably by populating his publications with gaps meant to indicate silences or pauses.

In all of these cases, Cage's goal is not to distinguish between kinds of sensory experience, but to demonstrate that sensory experience in general serves as the foundational and inalienable counterpart of linguistic communication. Especially where it translates into erasure-based methods, however, this demonstration frequently works to communication's detriment. That Cage's writing often serves to annihilate language's communicative capacity is best seen in his four-part "Empty Words," an example of his technique of "writing-through" composed by excising parts of Henry David Thoreau's *Journal* according to a series of chance operations (*Empty* 33). Aside from its scope and size, "Empty Words" exemplifies Cage's literary work in that it highlights both the critical and the affirmative parts of his aesthetics. By retaining white space in place of Thoreau's original writing, "Empty Words" highlights its creation by means of a reductive procedure (it is, essentially, a randomly-generated erasure) specifically designed to target and efface aspects of its source's sense-making function. This gesture is announced in an often quoted syllogism from Cage's introduction to the work:

"Syntax: arrangement of the army (Norman Brown). Language free of syntax:

demilitarization of language" (*Empty* 11). Cage's position as to what emerges in place of

a ruined syntax is also clear, as he writes just a few lines later, "What can be done with

the English language? Use it as material. Material of five kinds: letters, syllables, words,

phrases, sentences" (*Empty* 11).

Indeed, "Empty Words" is effective at allowing each of these elements to emerge

"in their suchness" (Mac Low, "Cage's Writings" 211) from the material remains of a

syntax whose communicative ability is presented in a state of progressive decay. The

effect is apparent from the first lines of "Empty Words":

> notAt evening
> right can see
> suited to the morning hour
>
>
> trucksrsq Measured tSee t A
> ys sfOi w dee e str oais

<div align="right">(Cage, Empty 12)</div>

It is probably obvious to most readers that working through these lines does not yield (at

least not without incredible difficulty) the impression of a coherent logical or narrative

structure; in other words, they cannot be apprehended, summarized, or translated in the

manner to be expected from texts that adhere to regular syntax. At the same time,

however, the text also does not enact a categorical fragmentation or atomization of

language that would definitively exhibit Cage's "five kinds" as primordial substances.

Cage's emphasis on sensory experience and "material," in other words, does not equate to

a philosophically materialist worldview that would seek to reduce all existence to certain

kinds of elemental matter. Although, for example, the entirety of the passage quoted

above is ostensibly composed of letters, its impromptu transitions between recognizable words and phrases, common English syllables, and unpronounceable letter clusters ensure that all of Cage's "five kinds" are given nearly equal opportunity to contribute to the experience of reading. Moreover, the pervasive ambiguity as to which "kind" of linguistic material will be perceived at any given moment—"oais," for example, can easily be read (or misread) as either a nonsensical syllabic cluster or an indication of the word "oasis"— suggests that Cage is most concerned with the text's ability to elicit experience in general, not with identifying each individual component of the text according to its definitive experience. In this way, "Empty Words" is well aligned with Cage's nondualistic worldview: it does not seek to reveal an objective system of physical reality any more than it expresses a univocal subjective intention or narrative logic. At issue, instead, is the immediacy and multiplicity of whatever presents itself to the senses from moment to moment.

This is why, alongside Cage's linguistic "[m]aterial of five kinds," one can also note the degree to which instances of their absence—the text's blank spaces—come forth in "Empty Words" as a linguistic material in their own right. In any textual document, the (often) white surface of the page has the same capacity to elicit sensory experience as anything printed on it (i.e., in the sense that whiteness, in contrast to pure transparency, can be seen). However, this fact is especially prominent in the fourth section of "Empty Words." Since only letters and syllables are retained in this section, white space is more prevalent in general. In addition, different visual configurations of white space suggest more dramatically different interpretations. For example, compare this first passage

(typical of the fourth section of "Empty Words") with a second passage from the same

section demonstrating a more dramatic use of white space:

```
                              o
            v                       nn psympntsre
           d.   S o tst                 h r              i
     h               uou i          e nnd
                              t
            tyw                  t    e
                              n
```
                                                    (Cage, *Empty* 66)

```
         oea
                                        ann



         h opls e ar as
```
                                                    (Cage, *Empty* 71)

As syntax breaks down and letters and syllables emerge in their visual and sonic

specificity, white space sheds its conventionally structural function of organizing

linguistic information and begins to take on positive content: like the newly liberated

material components of language, it acts as a sensory presence to be manipulated and

received in itself. In this "transition from language to music" (Cage, *Empty* 65), one

witnesses a treatment of blankness in line with the role Cage assigns to silence in musical

composition, for which both sounds and silence are "materials" since both take the form

of durations (*Silence* 18-19).

The same effect is achieved, though much earlier ("Empty Words" was composed

in the 1970s), by Mac Low's 1955 "biblical poems," his first to use chance operations. In

these poems, which are arguably some of the earliest forerunners of erasure poetry,

deterministic procedures are used to rearrange and excise parts of bible verses to produce

lines such as these, the first of "4.5.10.11.2.8.4.2., the 2nd biblical poem":

> thither;/___/to/___/
> not/___//___/tribe/___/
> every/___/the not/___//___/the before lest/___/ (Mac Low, *Thing* 39)

While Mac Low's "biblical poems" attend more to their status as scores for sonic

performance than the ambiguously sonic and visual manifestation of Cage's white space

in "Empty Words," Mac Low's use of blank spaces suggests a similar flattening of the

difference between empty and filled components of an artwork, as his note on the piece

refers to both as "events" that should be "equal in duration" (*Thing* 39). Mac Low's use

of slashes to demarcate blanks in the "biblical poems" draws immediate attention to an

effect that emerges only gradually in "Empty Words": where conventional texts

(including both Cage's and Mac Low's source texts) invite readers to parse, organize, and

hierarchize their material components (letters, syllables, words, and so on, but also

spacing and punctuation) according to the norms of syntax and communication, the

"biblical poems" establish a pattern of experiencing these elements as unique and

independent durations.

Overall, then, Cage and Mac Low use erasure as a means of highlighting what

Stalling calls the "fundamental materiality" of language (98); motivated by their Buddhist

and Daoist spiritualities, they invented forms of literary composition that systematically

dismantle their texts' ability to communicate intentional meaning. Both the use of chance

and the appropriation of existing texts are important parts of this general movement.

Regarding the former, Lejeune's analysis of Cage's use of "chance operations"

throughout his career suggests that Cage did not follow a fixed definition of randomness,

but instead treated it as an adaptable guiding principle on his journey toward a truly

nondualistic art. Meanwhile, Courtney Pfahl's compelling description of Mac Low's

attempts to excise authorial intention and power from his literary production

demonstrates the utility of his and Cage's use of appropriated, pre-existing texts as the

bases of their writing; insofar as eliminating hermeneutic authority means undermining

the traditionally asymmetrical power relations inherent in the reception of literary works,

repurposing pre-existing works contributes by disrupting the author's implicit claim to

have determined the work's meaning ("Reading"). Pfahl therefore argues that in Mac

Low's method of "writing-through," or selectively erasing pre-existing texts by means of

chance operations, "neither the author nor the structure of the text retains power or

control" ("Reading" 38), allowing the result of this method to approach what Pfahl calls a

"power-free text."

* * *

Even as Cage and Mac Low's use of erasure pursues a radical dispersion of power

and meaning, it is impossible to understand the consequences of their work (especially as

it has been comprehended by the critical tradition) without acknowledging that this

decentralization of authority is inherently coupled to the recentring of the specific belief

systems from which it emerges and to which it returns. Beginning with Gerald Bruns's

coining of the term "poethics" to describe the "crucial link" between Cage's "allowing

words […] to live their own lives" (220) and ethical interactions outside of the text,

critics have associated Cage's emphasis on the material elements of texts with his explicit

support for anarchistic forms of social and political organization. On the level of

intersubjective relations spanning both literature and law, this means that Cage and Mac

Low's pursuit of a "power-free text" (Pfahl, "Reading") should finally be understood as

proposing not an end to power as such, but a radical transfer of power to the figure of the

reader; as Dani Spinosa lucidly summarizes, the disruption of syntax and the

materialization of language in Mac Low's works is mostly important for its

transformation of the text into an opportunity for performance, which in turn "break[s]

open the processes of exegesis, of meaning-making on the level of the reader" (96) and

creates "a performative analogy of an anarchist, free community" (98). While

commentators do not entirely agree on the specific outcomes (whether aesthetic, social,

or political) of Cage and Mac Low's practices, their interpretations consistently associate

their works with acts of radical reversal analogous to the shift from author to reader,

which thus provides the most stable template for the authors' form of critical

intervention.[7] In order to realize writing as "that neutral, composite, oblique space where

---

[7] In fact, the singularity of this shift is so strongly emphasized that few critics address its inherent
doubleness: while Cage and Mac Low's methods invite their readers to take control of their works'
meaning, they also position Cage and Mac Low themselves as readers, though of different texts (i.e., the
works' source texts) than their audience is given access to. As I elaborate below through Pfahl's analysis,
this doubleness ultimately presents a significant obstacle to the efficacy of Cage and Mac Low's radical

our subject slips away," as Barthes famously put it (142), Cage and Mac Low paired their

dramatizations of "the death of the Author" with coordinate stagings of the birth of

(themselves as) the reader (Barthes 148).

Much like Heidegger's and Derrida's erasures (at least superficially), Cage's and

Mac Low's erasures can be understood as means of disrupting, fragmenting, and

dispersing the immaterial dimensions of intentionality that tend to adhere to literary texts;

in a broad sense, they seek to expose the deeper meaninglessness of language's ostensible

"power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21). Yet where Heidegger and especially

Derrida embrace and emphasize their erasures' potential to generate further

double/crosses of their trajectories, including crossings back to their *paleonyms*' enduring

responsibility for transcendental meaning, Cage's and Mac Low's writings tend to hold

their interpretations to a single step of erasure's indefinite movement, limiting it to a

single methodological and ontological reversal. Even as their methods appear to change

everything, in other words, their continuing fixation on binary structures—including, but

not limited to, those of meaning and material, author and reader, and theory and

practice—lead them to evade responsibility for maintaining and propagating certain of

the philosophical positions that underlie or escape those structures. In his review of

Cage's reception in Germany, Ian Pepper observes that "[t]o engage with Cage's work

means to work through [the] dangerous proximity of critical and mystical motifs" (47);

while Derrida is well known for embracing such dangers—for example, of being

mistaken, of miscommunicating, or of being erased—especially in and around his writing

---

politics. In the eyes of most critics, however, it is simply elided.

under erasure, Cage and Mac Low's insistence on downplaying the inevitable complications and double/crossings of the binaries their works pose ultimately limits their ability to inhabit them differently. It is in this sense that the authors' tendency to pair their literary explorations with philosophical argumentation, specifically of a kind closely allied with the strategies of negative theologians, cannot be separated from the analysis of how their erasures concretely work.

Beyond the ethical and political readings conducted by authors such as Bruns and Spinosa, and also beyond (though in a different sense) the belief systems Cage and Mac Low cite as motivations for their work, a variety of critics have been unafraid to suggest that their writing functions as a direct demonstration of conclusions germane to disciplinary philosophy. Steve McCaffery, for example, argues that Cage's practice of "writing-through" has "far-reaching ontological implications": at stake in Cage's writing, for him, is not merely the treatment of particular texts, but conclusive evidence of "the puissance of the non-linear," which ensures that any authoritative meaning remains ontologically subordinate to an infinite multiplicity of depersonalized potentialities ("Transcoherence" 333). In a similar vein, Craig Dworkin argues that Cage and Mac Low's chance-based poetics participate directly in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, specifically by testing, in a literal writing practice, Wittgenstein's assertion that there are always alternatives to the normal or logical reading of a linguistic utterance (Dworkin, *Reading* 91). Dworkin, invoking a conventional binary economy of philosophical labour, further describes Cage and Mac Low's writing as "a specific philosophical praxis to follow from [Wittgenstein's] general theory" (*Reading*

95). Finally, Michael O'Driscoll argues that Cage's work constitutes a radical poststructuralist critique of structure and intention (621), demonstrating that "[i]n a world without structure and foundation, the contingent and aleatory remain the only possible (non)principles of (dis)order, perpetually disturbing the surface of textual assemblages void of any stabilizing deep structure" (623).

Although the direct aims of theological investigation are not the same as those of Cage and Mac Low's literary writing, McCaffery's, Dworkin's, and O'Driscoll's commentaries suggest that the two practices employ a similar mechanism: both seek the experience of a fundamental or transcendental reality while simultaneously identifying and denouncing heresies—false yet threatening pretenders to the throne of truth. Even if Cage and Mac Low stress that transcendental foundations themselves are false, especially insofar as they are defined by authority and, in the context of literary and artistic expression, authorship, Cage and Mac Low's arguments are clearly structured to privilege certain interpretations of reality and exclude others. This underlying fact is betrayed, for example, by the doubling function of O'Driscoll's parentheses in his description of the contingent and the aleatory as "the only possible (non)principles of (dis)order" (623). O'Driscoll's wordplay demonstrates that the idea of unprincipled disorder nonetheless plays the role of an ordered principle in his assertion's grammatical structure, ensuring that the assertion remains reliant on the very frameworks it claims to abolish. Yet O'Driscoll does not dwell on this complication, ultimately implying that a proper interpretation of his analysis would extract an unproblematic understanding of the purely aleatory (however demonstrably impossible achieving such an understanding may be)

and ignore its discrepant portrayal in the concrete text.

Put this way, O'Driscoll's assertion—and by extension, if his reading is accurate, the underlying assertion of Cage and Mac Low's writing practices—bears a striking resemblance to that of negative or "apophatic" theology. According to Derrida's definition, negative theology

> consists in regarding every predicate, or even all predicative language, as inadequate to the essence, that is, to the hyperessentiality of God, and that, consequently, only a negative ("apophatic") attribution can claim to approach God, and to prepare us for a silent intuition of God […]. ("How" 144)

In the same way that, for O'Driscoll, the ontological supremacy of the aleatory lies beyond the linguistic frameworks of principle and order he nonetheless uses to indicate it, negative theology holds that God is beyond any of the means of describing Him available to human thought or communication. Despite making use of the bestiary of techniques available to avant-garde literary writing, Cage and Mac Low pursue a similar thesis. Their work is not designed to produce an experience of God per se, but the fundamental experiences of textuality and intersubjectivity their works convey share several traits with the God of Derrida's definition. Like negative theologians, Cage and Mac Low seek to reveal an underlying form of reality by de-emphasizing and obfuscating their language's capacity for predication (whether through the legibility of the text or the intentionality of the author) and instead stressing a silent, intuitive appreciation of its bare presence. As Peter Jaeger states in his comparison of Cage's work to the negative theology of Pseudo-

Dionysius, Cage's strategy resembles the latter in that its "turn towards indeterminacy, non-sense and silence […] negates any positive explanation or rational conception about 'reality,' while simultaneously presenting readers with a site for direct, non-conceptual experience" (101-102). In Jaeger's view, the only significant difference between the two discourses is that Cage's, since it does not indicate belief in a deity, should be taken not as theology but as "a form of Buddhist ontology" (102).[8]

Further connections become apparent when Cage and Mac Low's work is compared to that of Jean-Luc Marion, whose poststructuralist negative theology condenses and reinvents the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius and other important Christian negative theologians. In the same way that Cage's "writing-through" reveals "the infinite transcribed in the actual" (McCaffery, "Transcoherence" 338) or Mac Low's non-egoic techniques present "not ambiguity but, rather, limitless potential" (Spinosa 97), Marion's experience of God as love (properly understood as the Greek *agape*) is defined as that which exceeds any process of restrictive apprehension, including its own identification with itself (*God* 48). For all three, in other words, the fundamental ontological or theological experience Marion calls the "saturated phenomenon" is defined by its exceeding the scope of any singular, linear, or finite interpretation. Perhaps most

---

[8] The question of whether theology and ontology are essentially similar is extremely vexed, especially as Derrida perceives it in relation to the ontological tradition inaugurated by Heidegger (and of which Marion is a part). In the last pages of "How to Avoid Speaking" (whose notes also compare Heidegger's "~~Being~~" directly to Marion's "~~God~~" [313]), Derrida extensively considers the distinction between Heidegger's decision to cross out "Being" in *The Question of Being* (which appears to be quite obviously an ontological discourse) and his statement that if he were to write a theological text (which he in fact never did), the word "Being" would not appear in it at all (Derrida 189-95). Although Derrida does not provide answers to the questions he raises regarding this distinction (and says so explicitly ["How" 192]), his discussion serves to raise doubts about the validity of Heidegger's insistence that his ontological thought should not be interpreted as a theological commentary. In Derrida's characteristically inconclusive words, Heidegger "wrote, with and without the word 'Being,' a theology with and without God" ("How" 192).

importantly, however, Marion brings negative theology closest to Cage and Mac Low's poetic concerns by associating the principle of God's unknowability with the material use of language in a verbal or textual apparatus. In *God Without Being*, Marion writes that God must be understood as "the very God that no mark of knowledge can demarcate; and, in order to say it, let us cross out ~~God~~" (46). By highlighting the specific problem of the concrete text within negative theology's larger strategy, Marion's "~~God~~" demonstrates a deep kinship with Cage and Mac Low's material approach to challenging literary authority and revealing the non-egoic experience it dissimulates.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the motivations behind Marion's crossing out "God" and Cage and Mac Low's incorporation of erasure into their chance-based poetics are extremely similar, differing mostly in their disciplinary contexts and not in their core mechanism. In order to understand how this mechanism relates to that of Derrida's erasures, it is therefore prudent to examine the reasoning behind Derrida's rejection of negative theology. In turn, this examination should begin by dispelling a common interpretation of the rejection in which the themes of erasure and writing do not figure prominently: I call this interpretation the problem of the "beyond." Among those commentators who address the debate between Derrida and negative theology,[9] many (including Marion himself ["In the Name"]) agree that Derrida's dissatisfaction is based on the conclusion that negative theology's critique of the metaphysics of presence— meaning, roughly, the foundational belief that all things (including God) can be known

---

[9] It is important to note that many discussions of deconstruction and negative theology either do not reference the debate at all or severely minimize its significance, dubiously implying that the differences between the two philosophical methods are meaningless in regard to their application.

completely in positive terms, through their presence and formal identity—is not radical enough to constitute a true alternative. The problem can be summarized according to two possible readings of the prefix "*hyper*" in Pseudo-Dionysius's claim that God is "*hyperousios*" (meaning "beyond being" or "superessential"). In the reading attributed to Derrida, the apparent negation of God's being proposed by the "beyond" ultimately functions as a reaffirmation, since Pseudo-Dionysius's faith in God's existence—even if that existence exceeds anything that can be said about it—implies that God still "is" in a positive sense. Alternatively, in the reading adopted by Marion in "In the Name" (a direct response to Derrida's discussion of negative theology in "How to Avoid Speaking"), the true meaning of God's existence "beyond being" cannot be adequately comprehended within the binary of affirmation and negation; instead, negative theology's approach to God constitutes a "third way" extending beyond not only one form of affirmation, but the binary of affirmation and negation itself.

While framing the doubleness of the "beyond" in these terms largely reduces the nuanced definitions Marion and other critics (but notably not Derrida, at least not to the same extent) invoke to justify their positions, these nuances are less important than the fact that neither Derrida nor Marion claims to completely realize either of the two readings definitively. Both recognize, in other words, that the "beyond" remains problematic. In his response to Marion's "In the Name," Derrida both quotes his earlier acknowledgement of the "double and ambiguous value" of negative theology's "beyond"

("Derrida's Response" 44; "How" 158)[10] and stresses that none of his texts on negative theology should be understood as constituting "one thesis, phrased in one form through a single voice" ("Derrida's Response" 43). Meanwhile, Marion, though he argues forcefully for the realization of the so-called "third way" in the main text of "In the Name," admits in the ensuing conversation with Derrida that "the only way to understand the third way, beyond affirmation and negation, without coming back implicitly or explicitly to affirmation is to take seriously the pragmatic use of language" ("In the Name" 46). Since Marion states earlier that this "pragmatic use" is only completely realized "in the finally liturgical function of all *theo*-logical discourse" ("In the Name" 38), it should be understood that his own writing—which would be more accurately characterized as a "theoretical use of language" distinct from the "pragmatic use" (Marion, "In the Name" 38)—does not in itself constitute a solution to the problem.

The problem of the "beyond," therefore, should be taken as a point of relative agreement between Derrida and Marion, although it also sets the stage for their more significant divergence. Rather than a difference in opinion, this divergence has to do precisely with how each navigates the inextricability of the "beyond" from the "pragmatic use of language," whose importance is also stressed by Derrida ("Derrida's Response" 45). In this regard, the styles (though one could easily substitute "pragmatics") of Derrida's and Marion's texts differ substantially. Marion's "In the Name" (to a greater

---

[10] Derrida's comment in "How to Avoid Speaking" that "[t]he French expression 'plus d'être [more being, no more being]' formulates this equivocation in a fairly economical manner" (158, note by translator) indicates that this problem is analogous to that of Derrida's "*plus-que-présent* [more-than-present]" in *Dissemination*. See chapter 2 for further discussion of Derrida's "*plus-que-présent*."

extent than *God Without Being*, though not dissimilarly) is a more or less univocal explication of a philosophical position: it proceeds by reconstituting Derrida's argument in simplified terms, presenting a counter-argument, and evaluating the cohesiveness of each in turn. Furthermore, "In the Name" is intensely concerned with establishing the formal definitions of terms relevant to the debate, and even makes a point of criticizing Derrida's texts for failing to do so (Marion, "In the Name" 20-21). Meanwhile, although Derrida's main texts on negative theology clearly thematize certain arguments (i.e., their positional content is not absolutely ambiguous or undecidable), it is difficult to read them as linearly as Marion does. While the earlier text, "How to Avoid Speaking," oscillates between dismissals of negative theology and discussions of its contiguity with deconstruction, "*Sauf le nom*" goes so far as to explicitly present itself as a dialogue with multiple voices. There is, in Derrida's words, a "multiplicity of negations at work everywhere in [his] text[s] and in the texts [he] analyze[s]" ("Derrida's Response" 45). On the topic of definitions, Derrida happily accepts the imprecision—criticized by Marion—of expressions such as "metaphysics of presence" and "negative theology": in his response to Marion's "In the Name," he proudly notes that he always refers to the latter only as "what one calls negative theology," and that he cannot remember ever using the former in a discussion of negative theological thought ("Derrida's Response" 43).

If—as Marion and Derrida both acknowledge in principle—the pragmatic use of language is inseparable from the themes of negative theology, one cannot see Derrida's tactics merely as a way to delay or avoid aligning himself with a consistent philosophical argument. Certainly Derrida does intend to perform such an evasion, but the performance

is not without appeal to another kind of strategy: it is clear throughout Derrida's response

to Marion that his primary goal is not to define their philosophical positions more exactly,

but to distinguish the forms of their texts and the means of engagement and interpretation

(in other words, reading) appropriate to them. Derrida stresses that his works "are written

texts," meaning that "[t]hey have a pragmatic aspect, a performative aspect that would

require another kind of analysis" ("Derrida's Response" 43); later, he specifies that this

analysis "would require a long discussion with texts in hand. We would have to sit down

and re-read the texts" ("Derrida's Response" 45). Although these comments appear banal

or even digressive, connecting them to an earlier comment of Marion's reveals a crucial

distinction between Derrida's and Marion's understandings of their writing: while

Marion's is an argumentative discourse whose recommendation is to turn to that other,

pragmatic use of language constituted by theology in its "finally liturgical function" ("In

the Name" 38), Derrida indicates that his texts are themselves liturgical, in that their

significance should emerge not via comprehension and summary, but over the duration of

a performative reading. Derrida's writing therefore has something in common with both

Marion's theoretical discourse and liturgical theology, yet it can also be distinguished

from both, and in distinct ways. Deconstruction is not a theological liturgy because, while

both share the property Derrida calls prayer—the use of speech as an address to the

other—they are not aligned in the dimension of praise, or that which they celebrate or

speak about: where Christian liturgy praises God, deconstruction (at least on a pragmatic

level, as Derrida often acknowledged) is atheistic. On the other hand, the "pragmatic

aspect" that links deconstruction to liturgy is also what distinguishes the former from

Marion's argumentative, non-liturgical negative theology: even where Derrida and Marion agree in principle, each author is responsible for causing something concretely different to take place in their acts of writing and speaking.

One must be careful not to suggest simply that Derrida's discourse is pragmatic while Marion's is theoretical, or that Derrida's text is or does what Marion's judges best but does not itself do. Indeed, to make such a suggestion would mean reinforcing an analog of the hierarchical binaries (signified/signifier, speech/writing, etc.) Derrida's best-known texts are devoted to deconstructing. Derrida's writing is not the praxis that completes Marion's theory, and not only because an explicitly theological liturgy would fill the role of that praxis more perfectly. Rather, Derrida's work should be seen as reinforcing the recognition that any theoretical discourse is also in a sense pragmatic, or may at least be experienced as such in the context of an actual theoretical debate.[11]

Most importantly, these conclusions bear directly on the structure of Derrida's erasures, as well as their relationship with Marion's, Cage's, and Mac Low's. As I argued in chapter 2, Derrida's strikethroughs (for example, in his statement that "the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~ […] that escapes the instituting question of philosophy" [*Grammatology* 19]) inscribe a proliferation of double/crossing trajectories that thickens the space between the ideality of their *paleonyms* and their concrete dissolution, though without affirming either pole absolutely. Although "~~God~~" produces a comparable effect in Marion's text (arguably establishing a space of textual thickness between atheism and

---

[11] Derrida makes this argument throughout *Limited Inc*, in which Marion's descriptions of "theoretical" and "pragmatic" language are roughly mirrored in the definitions of "constative" and "performative" utterances famously proposed by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*.

faith), Marion demonstrates a limited recognition of erasure's implications for the

ontological (or, in Marion's case, theological) status of his own writing. Rather than

refracting and further exploring those implications, Marion leverages his innovation into

a reaffirmation of the binary economy of negative theological argument and liturgical

theological practice. Meanwhile, Derrida, by instead stressing the indefinite proliferation

of erasure's double/crossed trajectories, demonstrates that Marion's theological economy

is limited by an artificially strict separation of the theoretical and the pragmatic,[12] and

that it is ironically Marion, proponent of the "third way," whose beliefs are constrained

by the binary of theory and praxis. Despite incorporating and supposedly transcending

both negation and affirmation in general, negative theology leaves no room for the belief

that there is in fact no God.[13]

By claiming that the mutually supplementary poles of negative argumentation and

affirmative practice actually constitute a complete system, Marion ignores the possibility

of an alternate crossing of these categories (e.g., in a concretely atheistic discourse in

which the non-predication of God is not argued but performed) and thus implicitly

---

[12] Although Derrida never makes such a statement explicitly, the notion that he understands Marion's discussion of "~~God~~" in the context of negative theology as an incomplete elaboration of the capacities of writing under erasure suggests a compelling interpretation of his statement that "the expression 'negative theology' names most often a discursive experience that is situated at one of the angles formed by the crossing of […] two lines" ("*Sauf*" 63)—that is, the crossing of "philosophy or ontotheology of Greek provenance" and "New Testament theology or Christian mysticism," which is also figured by "the Christian cross under which Marion himself erases the word 'God'" ("*Sauf*" 62).

[13] Marion's discourse could be described as excluding what Hägglund calls "radical atheism," which indicates not simply the denial of God's existence (which, at least in its rhetorical function, would still be encompassed by Marion's negative theology), but the refusal to treat even the possibility of immortality or transcendence as life's governing principle or *telos*. In short, "radical atheism" is the notion that "life [is] essentially mortal" (Hägglund 1), so that death is not a shortcoming caused by the lack of immortality, but rather that which makes life what it is. The radical atheist lives not only without God's existence but also without desiring that existence. Therefore, more specifically, Marion's philosophy excludes the possibility of structuring desire around anything other than immortality.

marginalizes alternatives to his belief. To adapt Pepper's observation regarding Cage's work (47), Marion's treatment of the "proximity" of criticism and mysticism neutralizes its "dangerous" aspect: the risk, so often relished by Derrida, that the implication of one's own discourse in an attempt to calculate a limited economy may end up unleashing a plurality of unexpected possibilities. It is in light of this risk that Cage's and Mac Low's erasures, despite the fact that they (like Marion's "~~God~~") invite an initial reflection on this proliferation of possibilities, ultimately work toward an analogous neutralization. By partitioning literature into the abstract meaning of language and the concrete phenomenality of texts, and then fixing these aspects in an economic circulation that reinforces their separateness, Cage and Mac Low obscure the way in which they can be double/crossed against themselves—for example, when the recognition of authorial intention gives rise to the concrete dissemination of literary works. While Cage and Mac Low may not believe in an all-powerful creator, their system is thus theological in that it imposes a pervasive order on the literary universe: for them, meaning (in the sense of an author's intended message) is always subordinate to the true literature that is meaningless material presence.

When Cage writes, to take up just one example, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it / and that is poetry" (*Silence* 183), he both exposes an unjustifiably rigid binary and unjustifiably reinforces another. In the first place, by demonstrating that "nothing" can in fact be concretely said or spoken, he suggests that the conventional denigration of "what is not" in favour of "what is" is only one moment of an ontological circulation in which every experience (even the most formless, marginal, or insubstantial) manifests "in

its suchness" (Mac Low, "Cage's Writings" 211) on equal grounds with all others. On another level, however, he obviously communicates the association of some ideas (i.e., those indicated by "nothing," "saying," etc.) with "poetry" while either demoting or excluding others. Of course, no author can avoid promoting certain ideas over others in this manner, since any actual writing can communicate only a finite range of meanings to a finite range of degrees, and not every meaning at once or absolutely. But Cage and Mac Low's methods are unique in that they tend to present specific, communicable ideas as general frameworks that are meant to include everything of value. Moreover, the insistence that Cage and Mac Low's practice is non-egoic suggests that these frameworks, in addition to being universally applicable after the fact of their being posited, also originate from no one and nowhere in particular. This is why, paradoxically (and in my view unjustifiably), they are often seen as proposing values that can be imposed universally without constituting concrete acts of legislative violence or oppression. Nevertheless, the mere fact that experimental writing exists that is not predominantly influenced by Cage and Mac Low demonstrates the falsity of their poetics' universal appearance. In this sense, Cage and Mac Low's writing obscures its authors' responsibility for the specificity (in terms both of application and origination) of what is said in and accomplished by the literature they produced.

It is important to clarify that Cage and Mac Low's failure to explicitly take responsibility for the singularity of their texts is not the same as a failure to acknowledge the importance of singularity in general. It is clear, for example, that a certain singularity is at issue when Cage's "Empty Words" presents the reader with lines such as "aatoooff

sometimes purplish / with large leaves" (*Empty* 12) or "z s dl of failure Nov. 4" (*Empty*

25). Since engaging with "Empty Words" means systematically acknowledging the

material co-presence of all of its concrete components—for example, how a word or

sound string like "aatoooff" inhabits the same moment as the meaningful syntax of

"sometimes purplish," or how the category "failure" could be seen as including not only

concepts but also letters of the same kind that physically constitute its signifier—Cage's

text emphasizes that its manifestation as a literary work is thoroughly premised on unique

acts of reading. This emphasis on singularity is pushed even further with Mac Low's use

of blanks in his "biblical poems," since these blanks function to convert the reader's

engagement with the page's white space (which, since it generally acts as a background,

is almost never the locus of singular experiences) into the experience of individually

silent moments, each of which carries its own duration and significance.

The problem with Cage and Mac Low's means of acknowledging singularity in

this way lies in the fact that, as Timothy Clark puts it, "[t]he singular event is always

exemplary, its own commentary. That is to say it suggests, as an example, the paradoxial

[sic] possibility of a 'singular event' in general" (166). Even a text that stresses its

singularity as far as possible is double/crossed by this condition: alongside the sense in

which it is experienced as the singular event of a reading, it is also inevitably treated as a

literary work, where the latter's business is to represent an idea, perspective, or

commentary (however inexact or internally contradictory) for which its concrete text is

exemplary but not definitive. As works of this second kind, Cage's and Mac Low's poems

embody nearly all the attributes their authors seek to eliminate: they are not immediate

but durable, in that they are maintained as works through memory, archiving, and tradition; they are disseminated not as unique experiences, but as functional interpretations (in that one can, for example, know of a literary work without having read it, or mention it without quoting it);[14] and, rather than representing purely non-egoic entities untouched by authorial intention, they are inevitably identified with the authors to whom their dissemination can be historically traced. Further, even if the manifestation of Cage's and Mac Low's writings as literary works is not material in the sense of Cage's textual "[m]aterial of five kinds" (*Empty* 11), this does not make it illusory or unverifiable. As Pfahl argues with regard to *Words nd Ends from Ez*, Mac Low's initial success at actualizing a "power-free text" in his erasure of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* is indissociable from the re-establishment of textual power that accompanies his publication of the work in book form, specifically insofar as it accords with the institutional norms of literary authorship through which "the reading process's need for […] intention […] overpowers Mac Low's actual stated intent to create a work that is free of the author's intervention" ("Reading" 46). One need not argue for the existence of immaterial truths to acknowledge this "need for […] intention," since it is constituted in the form of written interpretations, published criticism, and other records whose materiality is ultimately of

---

[14] It is worth noting that this understanding of the identity and ideality of the literary object is in many ways promoted, not hindered, by the results of Cage and Mac Low's experimentation, since the illegibility introduced into their texts by chance operations makes it difficult to express a coherent understanding of the work without referring to its extra-textual contexts of production and reception. It is also notable that contemporary Conceptual writers directly influenced by Cage and Mac Low have gone furthest in affirming my understanding of the literary work. Dworkin, for example, takes it to its scholarly limits in his *Reading the Illegible* (a study of ostensibly illegible texts) and *No Medium* (a study of books composed entirely of blank pages), while leading Conceptualist Kenneth Goldsmith famously proclaimed, "You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like; you just need to know the general concept" ("Being"). Conceptualists have even proposed a new term, "thinkership," to describe the reception community for literary works whose apprehension is mostly or entirely disconnected from the actual act of reading them.

the same kind as Mac Low's book's.

As material texts, Cage's and Mac Low's poems are singular events, but as works they exemplify a literary effort whose general idea is the importance of the singular. And yet this idea, to follow another of its double/crossed trajectories, is also singular in its own sense, since its presence and influence within the literary institutions that preserve it are finite and measurable (e.g., by the number of extant copies of Cage's and Mac Low's works, the number of citations of their works published in other books and articles, etc.). What I am calling the literary work, then—a sort of double/cross of the poem's material text—emerges in excess of the reductive economy of singular and general, as well as any of the analogous binaries employed by Cage, Mac Low, or their interpreters: understanding and experience, authority and anarchy, theory and praxis, and so on. Furthermore, a work will repeatedly exceed any attempt to frame it in a limited economy of this kind.

The most significant outcome of Derrida's writing under erasure is to demonstrate that even the grand strategy of acknowledging both affirmation and negation—or, equally, both criticism and mysticism insofar as they define Cage's literary work—cannot neutralize the risk that any of its strategist's categories can always be turned against itself. But if Derrida's writing that the sign "~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~" (*Grammatology* 19) invites as thick a proliferation of turns and returns as his readers constitute in the course of their own interpretations, Mac Low's "I /___/" (*Thing* 40) excludes any critical discourse that might follow from its initial reversal—that by which the hierarchy of silence and voice is equalized in the turn to duration "in its suchness" (Mac Low, "Cage's Writings" 211).

Rather than inscribing the ineradicable partiality of its reversal within the resources it offers its reader, as Derrida does, Mac Low's erasure marginalizes the risk of its initial movement being subsequently undermined. And as is often the case, this marginalization can be perceived quite concretely as soon as a degree of critical distance is established: in the "biblical poems," one can easily question whether the frames with which Mac Low demarcates his poems' blanks do not explicitly promote these empty spaces above the many others (e.g., the typographical spaces he retains to separate voiced words, but also the literal margins of the page on which his poem is printed) that constitute the machinery of his text in ever-receding dimensions of non- or less-than-presence. When reading Cage and Mac Low's writing, in other words, one can always remark that some silences are more equal than others.

* * *

Many of those who have written on Cage and Mac Low's work, as well as Cage and Mac Low themselves in some of their later commentaries, readily acknowledge the many reasons their use of chance operations fails to achieve the ideal of a non-egoic or "power-free" (Pfahl, "Reading") artwork. Among these reasons are the facts that Cage's and Mac Low's selections of which texts to appropriate were not random, but instead based on their interests and environment; that the decision of which chance operations to

use in a composition (or even the decision to use them at all) is inseparable from the intentions of the composition's author; and that, quite simply, Cage and Mac Low (like almost all other artists known for their use of chance-based methods) almost never totally retained the results of their deterministic procedures, but frequently made undocumented or poorly documented alterations based on what they regarded as good writing or art. Nevertheless, despite an almost overcompensatory glut of apologies for the insufficiency of chance operations to achieve the holistic state of being Cage and Mac Low promise, few question that promise's ontological premises or press for a transformative re-reading of the principles at issue.

For his part, Mac Low reflects on his work's shortcomings in terms that appear modest, but in fact absorb his practice's contradictions into the idea that art, once it has been identified as such, simply does not need to justify its existence or effects. In his foreword to *Thing of Beauty* (his 2008 collection of new and selected works) Mac Low states that his writings, despite being unable to achieve the condition of non-egoic creation they were designed for, are "valuable in themselves" precisely as mixtures of intentional and non-intentional effects (xxxii). They are also, for that reason, no less appropriate to Mac Low's understanding of art, since, "[u]ltimately, artmaking, including the making of poems, seems to [him] to be primarily the making of 'objects' that are valuable in themselves" (Mac Low, *Thing* xxxii). This position has two troubling consequences. First, the suggestion that an artwork's meaning should be attributed solely to the artwork in itself allows Mac Low to abdicate responsibility for the intentions his writing does in fact communicate, even as he continues to benefit from the association of

the works with himself as author (e.g., by being invited to publish his views on artmaking in *Thing of Beauty* in the first place). Second, the suggestion that it is the mere existence of an art object that makes it valuable implies that the success or failure of a writer's attempts at communication is irrelevant; it makes no difference whether or not a work achieves its intended purpose or satisfies its audience's expectations as long as it is identifiable as an artwork, and while this last condition is far from trivial, Mac Low has little to say about it. Despite Mac Low's contention that the works he produced with chance-based methods still have "a directly political value" (*Thing* xxxii), his concession that the purpose of an art object is primarily to have "a being of its own" (*Thing* xxxii) thus fatally devalues the role of purposive critique in artmaking,[15] including the specific critique of authority and egoism that first motivated his own work. Instead, Mac Low ultimately absolutizes the mystical revelation of "chance operations"—that any and all being is appropriate to art—while relegating its critical function to the status of a mere accident, or at best a fortuitous waypoint on the road to the truth of mysticism. Meanwhile, his faith in the possibility and meaning of that truth—like the negative theologian's faith in God, despite the latter's being wholly beyond any articulable or practical meaning—is left both unshaken and unjustified.

While Lejeune praises Cage's work based on principles similar to Mac Low's,[16]

---

[15] In fact, Mac Low takes an explicit stance against mixing social and political critique with literary writing, asserting that the "agitprop artworks" that result are consistently "dismal failures, both as art and as social sanction" (*Thing* xxviii).

[16] According to Lejeune, Cage was able to truly express the nondualistic beliefs that motivated his "chance operations" only after he accepted the role of intention alongside rather than in opposition to non-intention. This is because a truly nondualistic ontology, Lejeune explains, contains no oppositions; as he puts it in his evaluation of Cage's "musicircuses" (large events involving several groups of musicians playing in

Ming-Qian Ma's remarkable interpretation of Cage's "chance operations" takes up an

entirely different strategy: rather than relying on mysticism to insulate Cage's artwork

from both characterization and critique, Ma suggests that Cage's practice is itself

uniformly and intentionally critical. In Ma's view, the very notion of "chance operations"

(which Ma interprets as a kind of oxymoron, in that it juxtaposes the pure non-

intentionality of chance with the pure intentionality of method) inherently communicates

its own impossibility, allowing it to act as an engine of social critique and satirical affect.

As Ma explains, "Cage's methodical praxis (purposefulness) […] is intended to be its

own critique and erasure (purposelessness)" (118), allowing it to "produce a satirical

effect both shocking and, therefore, revealing" (121). It is possible to critique Ma's

perspective on the basis of both its broadest assumptions (e.g., that what is shocking is

"therefore" revealing, which bears on a much larger debate regarding the value of satire)

and its specific interpretation of the facts of Cage's discourse (e.g., Ma's implicit claim

that none of Cage's many affirmations of mystical ideas were made seriously). However,

one can also uncover a fatal omission by following Ma's own means of justifying his

evaluation, which relies on his extended comparison between Cage's "counter-method"

and Jonathan Swift's infamous *A Modest Proposal*. According to Ma, the paradox of

Cage's "chance operations" works the same way as Swift's "modest proposal," since the

latter generates its ability to "shock" through the radically self-negating implication that

Victorian modesty can be equated with the policies Swift proposes (112-34). Although

---

different styles simultaneously, as well as carnival snacks and games), "each circus is indeed a faithful
picture of nature, for nature contains all" (215).

Ma's description captures an important aspect of Swift's rhetorical prowess, his comparison reveals a profound blindness to precisely the kind of phenomenological content—the *paleonym*—that Derrida shows remains legible behind any writing under erasure. This is because, essentially, Ma's comparison assumes that what is "shocking" in Swift's essay is the notion that cannibalism could be called "modest," but not by any means the depiction of cannibalism itself. In other words, Ma's emphasis on the formal interpretation of Cage's and Swift's discourses as self-negating or self-erasing misses the fact that each is also responsible for communicating something concretely, and that the difference between their referents is significant. Regardless of how each presents its topic, an essay about consuming human infants will not have the same effect on its audience as a "Lecture on Nothing."[17]

If both Lejeune's and Ma's interpretations of Cage's work seem to omit crucial consequences of that work in the course of their developing coherent arguments, it is important to note that their interpretations of Cage may be more characteristic of the critical tradition spawned by his writing than they are of the writing itself. Although it is not the focus of this chapter or my project as a whole, it may be more appropriate to embrace the messiness of Cage's literary output as one of its most important features, following the divergent threads of his texts and methodologies divergently rather than trying to tie them together. For example, what may be most compelling about Cage's work is that, as Andy Weaver puts it, it is a "didactic poetry" as well as a performative

---

[17] Cage appears to have been acutely aware of this, given his lecture's repeated incantation: "If anybody / is sleepy / let him go to sleep" (*Silence* 119-123).

one, simultaneously "call[ing] for and attempt[ing] to enact" the anarchist society Cage

envisioned (190) despite that society's being based precisely on the rejection of authority

and didacticism (a contradiction that, curiously, Weaver overlooks). Cage's 1988 volume

of "mesostics,"[18] *Anarchy*, unapologetically carries these contradictions to their extremes,

pairing Cage's remarkably lucid repetitions of influential anarchists' ideas with a method

that enacts them only by recycling their sense into texts that instead "make nonsense"

(Cage, *Anarchy* vi). Rather than settling these aspects of his project into a definitive

picture, Cage readily embraces the crossings and crossings out they motivate between

moments of the text's composition and reception, suggesting that his text's goal is "to

find a way of writing which through [sic] coming from ideas is not about them; or is not

about ideas but produces them" (*Anarchy* vi). The result is a poetry that seems radically

unable to stand on its own, whether as an object in itself or as a coherent critical position;

instead, *Anarchy* rethinks anarchism by way of anarchism, not as an act of self-reflection

but by thickening the differences between anarchism's many double/crossed

manifestations (e.g., as ideas, as texts, as readings, as experiences, and as ways of life).

    With this evaluation of *Anarchy* in mind, Cage's better-known mesostics and Mac

Low's later erasures, such as *Words nd Ends from Ez*, offer potentially fruitful grounds for

---

[18] Cage's "mesostic" method of writing poetry, which he practiced mainly throughout the 1970s and 1980s, involves "writing through" an appropriated text by painstakingly combing the text for sequences of the letters in a certain phrase (usually the author's name), correctly ordered and without repetitions, then selecting and preserving words surrounding the sought letters in order to produce a poem. Like the text of "Empty Words," Cage's mesostics fit the definition of erasure poetry in that each is a novel text produced by subtracting parts of an appropriated text. Further, although they do not preserve the exact spatial positioning of the preserved words as they appear in the original text, the mesostics' unusual visual presentation (Cage usually typeset the letters of the sought phrase, capitalized, in a vertical string in the middle of the page, then centred the lines of selected text around them) strongly conveys the impression of their concrete extraction from the original.

literary critics. Indeed, their absence from my analysis in this chapter is notable, since they both represent the bulk of Cage's experimental literary output and, having been composed partially by conscious selection rather than purely chance-based procedures, resemble contemporary erasure poetry more closely than "Empty Words" or Mac Low's "biblical poems." Perhaps most compelling are the mesostics' incredibly complex couplings of method, text, and message, even compared to later erasures; for example, both Cage's "Writing through the Cantos" (*X* 109-116) and Mac Low's *Words nd Ends from Ez* (which were composed using nearly identical methods and around the same time, though apparently without either author's knowledge of the other's project) combine explicit acknowledgements of Pound's authority over the text (both in their refusal to alter the typographical sequence of Pound's *Cantos* and their structuring their selections around the unintended appearances of his name within the manuscript), creative elaborations of Pound's signature literary techniques (such as his polyglot vocabulary in "Writing through" and his emphasis on sound and voice in *Words nd Ends*), and what scholars (especially Dworkin [*Reading* 88-122]) have interpreted as direct criticisms and corrections of Pound's fascist ideological leanings. With all of these factors in play, commentators have found it unsurprisingly difficult to hold them together within a single evaluation, and many of their conclusions tend to omit or marginalize aspects of Cage and Mac Low's procedures and outputs that nonetheless seem crucial within the texts themselves. Moreover, while Cage and Mac Low, as well as their critics, tend to acknowledge the increased role of authorial intention in various dimensions of the mesostics' meaning, they also tend to resist identifying the specific content of these

intentions or their literary effects in favour of renewing their attention to the mesostics'
continuity with the non-egoic methodologies of Cage and Mac Low's earlier work. For
example, although Cage suggests in the introduction to "Writing for the Second Time
through *Finnegans Wake*" (Cage ultimately "wrote through" the book five times by the
end of his career) that "[t]here were choices to be made, decisions as to which words
were to be kept, which omitted" (Cage, *Empty* 135), he says almost nothing about how or
to what ends he made these decisions; rather, the majority of his commentary describes
the physical method of finding (by chance) the passages from which his mesostics could
be extracted. It is for these reasons that I have both focused Cage and Mac Low's
connection to erasure through the lens of their earlier writings and, consequently, left a
fuller exploration of the relationship between erasure and the mesostics to future readers.

Regardless of whether the mesostics are seen as developments or derivatives of
Cage's and Mac Low's earlier projects, however, it is clear that Cage and Mac Low's
responsibility for the concrete outcomes of their erasures ends neither with their invention
of "chance operations" as a formal procedure nor with the bringing into being of a
decontextualized sequence of singular experiences "in their suchness" (Mac Low,
"Cage's Writings" 211). Rather, as Derrida's writings both expose and exploit, what an
erasure both means and does (there never being one without the shadow of the other)
depends on the indefinite proliferation of turns and returns between both form and
content, both critique and affirmation, both intention and object, and both poles of each of
the (also indefinite) plurality of analogous axes that come into view as the space between
them thickens. This does not mean that Cage and Mac Low's methods or the writings

they produced are inherently or fundamentally barred from accessing this proliferation or thickening. In contrast, I hope to have shown that their erasures' initial coupling of critical argumentation with the concrete affirmation of language's materiality represents an important step in the direction of pursuing a more Derridean erasure poetry. On the other hand, however, Cage and Mac Low cultivated an ostensibly limited interpretation of what this poetry could become, exchanging its promise of indefinite nuance for a relatively simplistic and enduringly binary view whose underlying spiritual assumptions remained unchallenged. By looking past Cage and Mac Low, then, and toward forms of erasure that developed later and otherwise, it is possible to follow their trajectory much further.

Chapter 4

Asymmetrical Collaboration: From the Cut-up to Erasure

Broadly speaking, contemporary literary applications of erasure can be
distinguished from proto-erasures such as John Cage's "Empty Words" and Jackson Mac
Low's "biblical poems" in two ways. In the first place, Cage and Mac Low's
methodologies tend to reproduce and reinforce binary structures in their attempts to
reverse them; Cage's "Empty Words," for example, although it aims to reduce language
to an exclusively material entity, reifies the role of Cage's authorial intention as a
function of its inability to eliminate meaning. In contrast, contemporary erasure
acknowledges and exploits these dualities via the unique double/crossing of what Jacques
Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena* (originally *La Voix et le Phénomène*) calls the
"phenomenological voice," taking up opposed positions only insofar as it also traverses a
substantial middle. As a result, contemporary erasures also tend to more thoroughly
realize their responsibility for the specific content of Derrida's *paleonym* or "old name"
(*Dissemination* 3), which constitutes an ineradicable remainder to the reductive economy
of methodology (theory, position, meaning, etc.) and demonstration (practice, experience,
material, etc.) in Cage and Mac Low's literary-ontological project. Exceeding both a
work's methodology and its materiality, the *paleonym* retains a "power of
communication" (Derrida, *Limited* 21) that resonates from beyond a writer's intentions
while nonetheless finding expression under the writer's name. Responsibility for the

paleonym thus eludes definitive calculations of agential power, although acknowledging its practical effects is often not difficult. In the case of Cage's "chance operations," for example, it simply means recognizing that Cage's writings on silence and emptiness have concretely different effects on their readers than Swift's infamous depiction of cannibalism in *A Modest Proposal*—despite Ming-Qian Ma's insistence that the two authors' works are essentially similar (112-34). The difference, in this case, is not rooted in the fact of signs' concrete materiality, but in their ability to convey equally concrete experiences to their readers by means of their referential content.

One can assume that William Burroughs, whose *Naked Lunch* was judged obscene by several American municipal courts in the early 1960s (though it was cleared of obscenity charges by the relevant states' Supreme Courts later that decade ["*Naked*" vii]), was well aware of the difference between the "shock" of a text's structure and that of its content. If Ma's suggestion that Cage's work produces "a satirical effect both shocking and, therefore, revealing" (121) depends on his framing Swift's *Modest Proposal* as a kind of scandal of interpretation (in that, according to Ma, it interprets cannibalism as "modest"), Burroughs's comparison of his own work to Swift's in the introduction to *Naked Lunch* proposes that the impact of each text is instead the result of direct, factual revelation. Burroughs's book is "necessarily brutal, obscene, and disgusting," he writes, because the subjects it treats actually exhibit those traits (Introduction xliv); it is not, in other words, a matter of mere interpretation. And in contrast to Ma's rather abstract portrayal of *A Modest Proposal*, Burroughs's language evokes a gut-wrenching viscerality that seems at least equally appropriate to Swift's intentions. Burroughs writes,

"As always the lunch is naked. If civilized countries want to return to Druid Hanging

Rites in the Sacred Grove or to drink blood with the Aztecs and feed their Gods with

blood of human sacrifice, let them see what they actually eat and drink" (Introduction

xliv).

Yet Burroughs's legacy of explicit social commentary, especially when contrasted

with Ma's reading of Cage and Swift, deeply contradicts his equally well-remembered

popularization of Brion Gysin's experimental "cut-up method" of literary production. As

a chance-based, subtractive method of concretely manipulating appropriated texts, the

cut-up is both superficially similar to processes like Cage and Mac Low's and similarly

important to the development of erasure poetry, joining Cage's chance operations in

directly influencing Tom Phillips's first experiments with *A Humument* (Phillips, "Notes,"

second revised ed.; Phillips, "Notes," final ed.). Burroughs and Gysin also connect their

method to many of the same themes and goals expressed by Cage and Mac Low: all four

authors seek to produce literature uncontaminated by authorial control or egoism, and to

draw out the expressive capacities of language as an independent, material entity. Perhaps

following cues from Burroughs himself,[1] critics have shown little interest in untangling

Burroughs's use of frequently non-syntactical, deeply ambiguous, and literally random

---

[1] For his part, Burroughs seems to have had no difficulty reconciling the explicit social commentary of texts like *Naked Lunch* with his use of non-egoic experimental techniques. As Gysin recounts in *The Third Mind*, Burroughs even goes so far as to suggest that *Naked Lunch*, which predates the formalization of the cut-up method, was composed as a cut-up "without the author's full awareness of the method he was using," since its sections were recovered (i.e., from among the many scattered pages littering Burroughs's room at the Paris Beat Hotel), transcribed, and sent to the printer in a random order (Burroughs and Gysin 42). Further, Burroughs's statement that he "ha[d] no precise memory of writing the notes which have now been published under the title Naked Lunch" (Introduction xxxvii) indicates the drive he shared with Cage and Mac Low to produce literature without conscious intention or structure, even if the non-egoic aspect of Burroughs's novel was the accidental result of drug-induced delirium and not systematized in advance.

texts—which he developed in order to eliminate authorial control and highlight the independence of both the reader and language itself—from his expectation, obvious in his political diatribes, that the same writing should reveal specified truths and exercise a determinate influence on its readership. With reference to the contemporary landscape of avant-garde literary discourse, however, it is increasingly difficult to conflate Cage and Mac Low's comparatively clean poetics—in which rarefied aestheticism, mysticism, and utopian politics vastly overshadow any engagement with specific social or political tensions—with Burroughs's much more chaotic legacy of mixing experimental practice with both political scandal and the imaginative space of popular fiction. Burroughs's work, in this sense, spans both sides of Joshua Clover's divide between the aesthetic, formalist avant-garde and the socio-political avant-garde, despite the fact that Clover understands the two types to be fundamentally opposed.

I argue that erasure poetry, both in its contemporary forms and in its development alongside Cage, Mac Low, and Burroughs's post-war experimental literary practices, is well suited to exhibit the paradoxical entanglement of Clover's two avant-gardes. I also argue that their entanglement should be explicated with greater theoretical nuance than is often embraced by historicizing accounts of Burroughs and other avant-garde figures, which tend to lump the variety of their literary acts into a simplistic and, ultimately, logically unsound ideological harmony. Erasure poetry stems from some of the mid-twentieth century's most radical experiments in removing authorship and intentionality from literature, yet it manages to redeploy these experiments' concrete methods (which the initial experimenters assumed were inherently anti-authoritarian) toward texts with

recognizable stakes in the enduring value of the authorial voice and its ability to communicate specific, concrete experience. While the desire to limit the role of the author in literary writing is clearly at play in contemporary erasurists' use of texts appropriated from other writers, their readiness to take responsibility for the decisions behind how appropriated works are selected and presented differentiates them from their predecessors. If Cage and Mac Low's work involves the utopian attempt to create literature for everyone by wholly negating the individual self, contemporary erasures engage with a finite number of particular others by re-situating the self as a dialogic entity. Rather than a negation of subjectivity, in other words, erasure operates through the pluralization of subjectivities Mikhail Bakhtin calls heteroglossia. As Bakhtin writes, "[h]eteroglossia […] is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. […] And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated […]; it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other" (218). These two (or more) voices are more than aesthetic categories or opposed types; rather, they express the real content of "a fundamental, socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-languagedness" with a key role in constructing its writers' and readers' discursive universe (Bakhtin 219).

Bakhtin's dialogism provides a useful literary model for the manifestation of erasure I call *asymmetrical collaboration*, especially insofar as Bakhtin seeks to undercut monolingualism by way of conversation, interrelation, and refraction between authorial voices rather than through the direct and total dissolution of voice. But the stakes of this latter distinction are perhaps clearest in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's introduction

to *A Thousand Plateaus*, "Rhizome," even if, in order to uncover them, one must go

beyond that text's better-known positioning of the "arborescent" taproot against the

rhizome.[2] While Deleuze and Guattari intend primarily for rhizomatic multiplicities to

supplant traditional "arborescent" structures of knowledge—which are defined by their

assuming and reinforcing a "strong principal unity" at the heart of expression and reality

(*Thousand* 5)—the rhizome is also threatened by a third kind of system they call the

"radicale-system" or "fascicular root." In short, the radicale-system is like the rhizome in

that it aims to disrupt arborescence's "strong principal unity," but flawed in that its

manner of rejecting that unity actually risks affirming a stronger one. In the radicale-

system,

> the principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed; an immediate,
>
> indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a
>
> flourishing development. [...B]ut the root's unity subsists, as past or yet to
>
> come, as possible. We must ask if reflexive, spiritual reality does not
>
> compensate for this state of things by demanding an even more
>
> comprehensive secret unity, or a more extensive totality. (Deleuze and
>
> Guattari, *Thousand* 5-6)

Radicale-systems or fascicular structures of this kind can be identified in the work of

Cage and Mac Low, as well as in Jean-Luc Marion's negative theology, since in each case

---

[2] In a profound, though rarely acknowledged irony, most critical discussions of "Rhizome" and other texts by Deleuze and Guattari treat the arborescent-rhizomatic distinction as a binary classification, even as it is meant to distinguish binaries themselves from genuine multiplicities. In doing so, these discussions ignore both Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that "the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models" (*Thousand* 20) and their additional distinction between the rhizome and the "radicale-system" or "fascicular root."

the conventional reverence for unified expression is opposed to a total, simultaneous, and symmetrical fragmentation. In Cage's "Empty Words," for example, all concrete elements of the text are invoked as points of resistance to the unification of meaning, while for Marion the truth of God is hidden in the inadequacy of all singular descriptions of His being. Ultimately, however, the absolute form of these oppositions creates binary economies in which infinite multiplication reinforces a complimentary universal position: for Cage, the fundamental value of objective presence, and for Marion, the unquestionable existence of God. Despite the initial multiplication, a fascicular multiplicity thus affirms a certain unity as the basis of all relationships within the multiplicity, to the exclusion of other concrete possibilities.

While all of the appropriation-based literary methods I analyze—including Cage's, Mac Low's, and Burroughs's—are designed to undermine the conventional unity of authorial intention and instead create literary multiplicities, Deleuze and Guattari's critique suggests that nuanced evaluation is required to determine their success or failure at accomplishing this goal. The evaluation is especially pressing in light of the fact that Deleuze and Guattari explicitly identify Burroughs's cut-up method as an exemplary radicale-system (*Thousand* 6). Moreover, critics such as Gregg Lambert have fleshed out Deleuze and Guattari's implication that radicale-systems are also at work in the poststructuralist theories of Derrida and Roland Barthes (51-52), both of whom are integral to many critical justifications of appropriation-based writing. Nevertheless, commentators frequently use Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical frameworks to explain and praise appropriation-based writing, erasure poetry, and even Burroughs's cut-up

method specifically (see Goddard 166), often while celebrating these literatures' kinship with the same poststructuralist thinking Lambert suggests is threatened by Deleuze and Guattari's work.[3] Among my primary goals in this study is to rectify this trend of flattening and homogenizing the theoretical evaluation of appropriation-based literature in order to more thoroughly elaborate the historical specificity of erasure writing and its contemporary varieties.

In this chapter, I approach this goal by briefly analyzing the cut-up method and its incorporation into Burroughs's later, less experimental style, and then explore the enduringly experimental method of Tom Phillips's artist's book *A Humument*. While Phillips's method was initially inspired by the cut-up, *A Humument* adapts the cut-up into a very different creative process representing one of the first examples of contemporary erasure poetry. In both Burroughs's later work and Phillips's *A Humument*, the cut-up aesthetic—whose purest manifestations demonstrate the same kinds of problems I identified in Cage and Mac Low's chance-based literary appropriation—is mixed with elements that tend to stabilize and unify literary meaning, including authorial intention, narrative consistency, and critical positioning. Yet the result of this mixing, though it can be described in certain moments and contexts as conservative, is not a regressive response to multiplicity. Rather, Phillips's activations of "knots of arborescence" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 20) throughout *A Humument* are instrumental in

---

[3] Timothy S. Murphy's *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* is an especially remarkable example of this trend. While centring Deleuzian frameworks and mining Deleuze's texts for practically every positive reference to Burroughs's work (including comments from a personal email exchange between Deleuze and himself), Murphy brazenly misrepresents and dismisses Deleuze and Guattari's direct critique of Burroughs's cut-up method in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Murphy 140; Deleuze and Guattari 6).

distinguishing it from the failures of radicale-systems. While the latter seek to annihilate

arborescence through an infinite and symmetrical dispersion, *A Humument* creates a finite

literary universe in which the actors responsible for making meaning—including human

subjects, fictional characters, and signifying marks such as strikethroughs and

paleonyms—contribute to the indefinite thickening of a plurality of asymmetrical

doublets: for example, those of subject and world, writer and reader, ideal and actual, and

intention and effect. Burroughs himself, unable to achieve this thickening within his most

intensively experimental writing, instead pursued it through the increasingly traditional

novelistic writing of his later career. His struggles to make the cut-up method "work" in

this regard thus help bridge the gap between chance operations and erasure poetics by

excavating Cage and Mac Low's failings and pointing the way to a more rhizomatic

literature.

* * *

Although Gysin based his cut-up method on the early twentieth-century avant-

garde experiments of Dada and Surrealism,[4] his and Burroughs's interest in the technique

---

[4] The most obvious antecedent of Gysin's cut-up method is Tristan Tzara's "Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love," which includes instructions for making a poem by cutting individual words out of a newspaper article and reassembling them at random (Tzara 39). Another well-known example of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde's experiments with chance-based collage is the Surrealist exquisite corpse, in which collaborators draw parts of a figure without being able to see their partners' contributions; this

at the beginning of the Beat poetry movement was instrumental in establishing

appropriation-based writing and artmaking in post-war Anglo-American culture. Phillips

cites Burroughs's 1965 *Paris Review* interview, for example, as his introduction to

techniques like the cut-up and inspiration for beginning *A Humument* ("Notes," second

revised ed.), although the most complete collection of Burroughs and Gysin's cut-up

theory and practice is their 1978 co-authored book *The Third Mind*. While the cut-up

method is not strict and can be adapted to many different kinds of material texts (as well

as other media such as audio and video recording), the gist of the method is probably best

summarized in Burroughs's "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," which instructs as

follows:

> The method is simple. Here is one way to do it. Take a page. Like this
>
> page. Now cut down the middle and across the middle. You have four
>
> sections: 1   2   3   4 . . . one two three four. Now rearrange the sections
>
> placing section four with section one and section two with section three.
>
> And you have a new page. (Burroughs and Gysin 29-31)

If "[t]o engage with Cage's work means to work through [the] dangerous

proximity of critical and mystical motifs," as Ian Pepper suggests (47), Burroughs's cut-

up experiments seem intent on making these same motifs even more proximate. While

scholars such as Robin Lydenberg (102), Timothy S. Murphy (106), and Edward S.

Robinson (9) emphasize the cut-up's ability to "expose" (Lydenberg) or "decode"

(Robinson) the internal contradictions and false authority of the texts it treats, they tend

technique is also easily adapted to writing.

to neglect the fact that Burroughs and Gysin interspersed these operations with pronouncements, themselves intensely authoritative, of their own mystical beliefs. For example, in "Cut-Ups Self-Explained" the authors' criticism of intellectual property and language as a means of control is explicitly tied to their mystical assertions of language's autonomous materiality,[5] as they instruct their readers to "[t]ake [their] own words or the words said to be 'the very own words' of anyone else living or dead. You'll soon see that words don't belong to anyone. Words have a vitality of their own" (Burroughs and Gysin 34). Both Lydenberg and Michael Sean Bolton note this "didactic quality" (Lydenberg xi) of Burroughs's writing in early cut-up texts such as *The Third Mind* and the books of *The Nova Trilogy*, which seem equally devoted to explaining and justifying the cut-up method as they are to actually applying it. Bolton even complains of the difficulty generated by the often unannounced combination of these types of discourse, writing that, "[u]nfortunately, Burroughs' instructions tend toward the performative rather than the descriptive, utilizing the experimental techniques being exposed to deliver the exposition" (11).

Yet one may ask whether Burroughs did not have good reason to conflate his texts' descriptive and performative modes in this way. While Cage, Mac Low, and Marion largely isolate their works' "didactic" or mystical pronouncements from their activations of language's performativity[6]—and, as I argued in chapter 3, use this isolation to grant a

---

[5] Elsewhere in the book, Gysin writes that "[i]t's just material, after all. There is nothing sacred about words" (Burroughs and Gysin 43).
[6] This judgement is perhaps unfair to Cage, who is well known for blending the descriptive content of his lectures with performance and presentation techniques that do not facilitate (and often detract from) the direct communication of information. In this sense, Cage did seek to describe and perform the dissolution

veneer of soundness to the works' underlying assumptions—Burroughs's interest in more

explicitly problematizing the descriptive-performative distinction may stem from his

realizing the flaw in their strategies. If the purpose of the cut-up and readers' engagement

with it is to undermine the assumed authority of the "word virus," as Burroughs dubs it in

Nova Express and elsewhere in *The Nova Trilogy*, by instead promoting awareness of

language's profane materiality, this goal is quickly beset by a performative contradiction.

On one hand, to definitively "Rub out the Word" (Burroughs and Gysin 46)[7] in its

capacity to create and control meaning requires that Burroughs abandon language's

descriptive function entirely, presenting words solely as material objects to be concretely

manipulated. On the other hand, Burroughs cannot share the purpose of this manipulation

with his readers unless he communicates it through his own authoritative

pronouncements in a strictly descriptive mode. Although Burroughs was never able to

resolve this contradiction, his writing distinguishes itself from Cage's, Mac Low's, and

---

of meaning simultaneously, partly transforming his lectures into artistic compositions that would "permit the listener to experience what [he] had to say rather than just hear about it" (Cage, *Silence* ix). On the other hand, Cage's comments suggest that his means of mixing descriptive and performative registers has less to do with questioning the distinction between them in general (as it does for Burroughs) and more to do with emphasis and embellishment. In reference to his statement that he gives lectures out of "a need for poetry," for example, he suggests that poetry is defined by "its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words. Thus, traditionally, information no matter how stuffy (e.g., the sutras and shastras of India) was transmitted in poetry. It was easier to grasp that way" (Cage, *Silence* x). Despite admitting that the experiential aspects of language can aid in its task of communicating information, these statements maintain that the means by which something is said are essentially distinct from the content of what is said. Thus, while Cage's means of composing his lectures may be "analogous" to his means of composing musical and literary works (Cage, *Silence* ix), it appears that the former are not meant to undermine or eliminate the semantic function of language in the same way or to the same extent as the latter.

[7] While originally attributed to Gysin in *The Third Mind*, this phrase is repeated by Burroughs's Hassan i Sabbah in *Nova Express*. The passage, part of Hassan i Sabbah's "last words," reads, "I Hassan i Sabbah *rub out the word forever*. If you I cancel [sic] all your words forever. And the words of Hassan i Sabbah as also cancel [sic]" (Burroughs, *Nova* 12). While Hassan i Sabbah is in a distant sense Burroughs's fictionalization of the historical persona who shares his name, Burroughs often connects the character to Gysin, while commentators often see him as a representative of Burroughs's own beliefs.

Marion's in its attempts to address the problem within a single work. Without escaping

the descriptive-performative binary, then, Burroughs's writing focuses attention on its

persistence across the multiple, double/crossed dimensions of meaning in erasure and

other appropriation-based literature.

Near the end of his "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," Burroughs's mixing of

descriptive and performative registers is explicitly framed as a demonstration of the

method described more straightforwardly at the beginning of the piece, and it is therefore

unlikely to present difficulties to a reader's understanding of what cut-ups are and how

they work. At the same time, the explanatory power of Burroughs's frame also reinforces

the role of descriptive language in the resulting text. The text explains,

> Now here are the preceding two paragraphs cut into four sections and
> rearranged:
>
> ALL WRITING IS IN FACT CUT-UPS OF GAMES AND ECONOMIC
> BEHAVIOR OVERHEARD? WHAT ELSE? ASSUME THAT THE
> WORST HAS HAPPENED EXPLICIT AND SUBJECT TO STRATEGY
> IS AT SOME POINT CLASSICAL PROSE CUTTING AND
> REARRANGING FACTOR YOUR OPPONENT WILL GAIN
> INTRODUCES A NEW DIMENSION YOUR STRATEGY, HOW MANY
> DISCOVERIES SOUND TO KINESTHETIC? WE CAN NOW
> PRODUCE ACCIDENT TO HIS COLOR OF VOWELS. (Burroughs and
> Gysin 33)

As a demonstration or example of Burroughs's method, this passage exhibits many of the key traits of a language stripped of its authoritative capacities and reduced to a non-linear materiality. The passage's first sentences, for example, introduce a reduction and ambiguation of context leading to multiple contradictory readings: "WHAT ELSE?" may be read as requesting an alternative or addition to the description of writing presented in the first statement, or as a rhetorical question affirming that the initial statement is the only viable option. By subverting the reader's expectation of normal punctuation and syntax, the passage's long third sentence disrupts attempts to determine its basic meaning linearly, instead presenting a kind of reservoir of raw material that can be taken up in a multiplicity of branching interpretations. As is the case with much of Burroughs's cut-up writing, the number of interpretations possible for even a short passage such as this one is so immense that listing all of them would be pointless. However, this only draws attention to the one quality shared by every member of this multiplicity: each is an example of the kind of language produced by the cut-up method. Owing to this commonality, every otherwise divergent interpretation of the cut-up passage implicitly coincides at the belief that the method of their production, despite the multiplicity of its results, is singularly affirmed by its author. No matter the extent to which Burroughs seeks to "cancel all […] words" by putting even his own words under erasure (Burroughs, *Nova* 12), his text therefore retains its foundation in the implicit, though fully coherent authority of a particular methodology.

From Burroughs's perspective, this interpretive trajectory presents a decisive problem: rather than leading the reader to recognize the materiality, non-linearity, and

false authority of all language, it suggests that these are the peculiar and predictable result

of a certain authorized method. The ontological thrust Burroughs seeks to foreground in

the passage is therefore restricted in two ways. In the first place, the cut-up's applicability

to language in general is limited by its being typified as a specialized use of language.

Second, Burroughs's means of presenting the cut-up necessitates and therefore validates

an exception to its ontological premises, since the description of the method itself must

be understood linearly and authoritatively in order for its results to exhibit the inverse of

these traits. Both of these restrictions are established by the contextualizing or framing

structure internal to Burroughs's text; because the cut-up paragraph is explicitly

introduced as the demonstration of an already described and authorized method, it is both

contained and overwritten by the authoritative presentation of that method. For

Burroughs to unequivocally assert that "[a]ll writing is in fact cut-ups" (Burroughs and

Gysin 32), his cut-up should instead break through the framing structure that separates an

original, authoritative revelation from the actualization of possibilities that derive from it.

As Murphy puts it, quoting Burroughs himself,

> "art leaves the frame, and the written word leaves the page" in order to
>
> change material reality, not by asserting some essential truth that they
>
> alone could preserve against the ideological falsity of reality, but by
>
> multiplying and disseminating the creative power of the false, the untrue,
>
> the forgery. (6)

There must be no legible distinction, in other words, between a performative language

that makes happen and a descriptive language that addresses the truth of what happened.

The text must simply happen, without allowing itself to congeal into hierarchical

structures of contextualization or framing.

Throughout *The Third Mind*, Burroughs and Gysin consistently turn to

simultaneity—for example, the simultaneity of description and performance, or of

intention, evaluation, and effect—as a means of eliminating the authority of the frame.

This is well represented by the authors' use of visual collages, non-linear layouts such as

grids and tables, and "word pictures," all of which are motivated by visual media's ability

to "shorten" (as Gysin describes it in "Let the Mice In" [Burroughs and Gysin 63]) the

presentation and revelation of meaning to the space of an instant, the duration of a

"*click*."[8] For Burroughs, however, the power of simultaneity need not be specific to

visual media, as he shows in "In Present Time." By simultaneously describing and

performing this text's experimental method, Burroughs's writing can be seen as an

attempt to mitigate the problem of framing faced by "The Cut-up Method of Brion

Gysin."

Burroughs's contribution to "In Present Time" begins:

now try this take a walk a bus a taxi do a few errands sit down somewhere

drink a coffee watch tv look through the papers now return to your place

and write what you have just seen heard felt thought with particular

---

[8] In "Precise Intersection Points," Burroughs uses the figure of the "*click*" to further associate instantaneity and simultaneity with the (aural and visual) materiality of language. Burroughs writes that

[…] words *are* pictures and vice versa. What we are tracking here is: How does a word become a picture? and, How does a picture become a word? In either case, you know it is happening when something clicks. For a picture, the *click* is like a camera shutter. For a text, it is more like the *click* of a tape-recorder switch. Listen for that *click*. (Burroughs and Gysin 135)

> attention to precise intersection points where you from on television its a
> long way to go coca cola sing just after where the old bank used to be was
> open Sundays there on pasteur boulevard only it isn't pasteur now its
> mohomed v tunnel of old photos you lika the boys or the girls post office
> where all the clerks walked out at 435 […]. (Burroughs and Gysin 113)

Like "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," "In Present Time" conveys a set of instructions describing a version (albeit a rather unsystematic one) of the cut-up method. Unlike the former essay, however, it does not explicitly distinguish its description of the method from its use, since several of the things Burroughs has "just seen heard felt thought" appear in the same diegetic stream as the instructions to see, hear, feel, and think them, without any shift in context or rhetorical mode being announced. This generates a text in which the distinctions between descriptive and performative discourse are substantially blurred. For example, when reading "sing just after where the old bank used to be was open Sundays there on pasteur boulevard," it is especially hard to disentangle the imperative voice of the passage's initial instructions (echoed here in the verb "sing," which does not have any other obvious syntactical role) from the demonstration that those instructions are also already being fulfilled in the course of communicating them—and, moreover, as a grammatically inalienable condition of communicating them. While this interweaving of descriptive and performative discourse makes it difficult to formalize the experimental method depicted by "In Present Time," the disruption of formalization as such is necessary if Burroughs is to avoid the abstracting, hierarchizing, and controlling functions of the "word virus." It is important

that Burroughs's text does not affirm (even implicitly) a set of descriptive principles that could be separated from and valued above the demonstrative uses of language they govern. Instead, whatever descriptive function cut-ups (and, in fact, all texts) appear to exhibit should be undermined by their occurring simultaneously with concrete, non-determinative effects. Only by perfecting this simultaneity can Burroughs free his engagement with the cut-up method from language's tendency to re-establish hierarchical systems of governance within meaning.

One may immediately question the success of "In Present Time" by observing that the simultaneity of descriptive and performative discourse it offers is nowhere near perfect; apart from a few passages, most of the piece can be divided rather neatly into the functions of instruction and demonstration. This criticism, however, does not address a far more compelling challenge to the text's adequacy to the cut-up method's ontological pretensions—more compelling because it does not merely indicate the incompleteness of Burroughs's project, but instead highlights its overall incompletability. The alternative critique addresses the agents of responsibility—the writer(s) and reader(s) of texts such as "In Present Time"—that concretely manifest in the course of the texts' dissemination, yet in excess of the discursive modes whose distinction (or non-distinction, as in the hypothetical simultaneity "In Present Time" approaches) is legible within the text itself. Two considerations are important in regard to these agents of responsibility. First, although they are not properly interior to Burroughs's texts (one may say they would be the subject of a historicist rather than a formalist analysis), they are no less necessary to the concrete fact of those texts' production and reception—for example, in the

commentary I am writing now. Second, they constitute one of the dimensions whose manifestation always risks complicating, cutting across, or crossing out a work's attempt to equalize the asymmetries of signification.

While the simultaneity of description and performance in "In Present Time" protects Burroughs from re-establishing patterns of linguistic dominance within his text's internal structure, the text's content—or its capacity to concretely communicate experience to its readers—shows that this same simultaneity exacerbates the asymmetry of authoritative control and readerly submission on the level of the work's dissemination. Similar to Courtney Pfahl's critique of Mac Low in "Reading [as] the Power-Free Text,"[9] the contrast can be brought out by comparing Burroughs's performance in each of the two roles he occupies by writing and publishing "In Present Time." As an adherent to the cut-up method (or, in Pfahl's terminology, a "reader" of the pre-existing language he incorporates into his cut-up writing), Burroughs is well served by the simultaneity of description and performance in "In Present Time," since the lack of a clear distinction between these two modes dehierarchizes the relationship between the writing he produces and the instances of language he appropriates and engages. However, in light of his role as an author responsible for disseminating cut-ups and the cut-up method, the relative equality between Burroughs's act of writing and its material sources translates into an intensified asymmetry between Burroughs's and his readers' relationships to the text.

---

[9] Pfahl's argument is split into two parts, which refer to Mac Low's roles as a reader and as a writer, respectively. First, she argues that "when operating as a reading strategy—though not as a compositional strategy—Mac Low's procedural method in [*Words nd Ends from*] *Ez* […] succeeds in carrying out a reading process that effectively neutralizes textual power" (Pfahl, "Reading" 34). Following this, however, Pfahl counter-claims that the "textual operation of power" between author and reader "is reestablished with the publication of *Ez* as a new work of poetry" (Pfahl, "Reading" 35).

This is because "In Present Time," in accordance with Burroughs's fidelity to a non-egoic

apprehension of the specific material circumstances surrounding the text's composition,

manifests through a series of referents that are central to Burroughs's personal existence

but (mostly) remote to that of his readers, including parts of Burroughs's neighbourhood,

his interactions with passersby, things he read and saw during, or immediately prior to,

the text's composition, etc. While "In Present Time" does not enforce a hierarchy of

discursive modes within language, the patterns of centrality and marginality that manifest

through its publication and dissemination are for that reason all the more obvious. In lieu

of the conventional power dynamic between a creative author and a receptive readership,

"In Present Time" is defined by Burroughs's reception of his concrete situation, which

thus takes on its own kind of authority in contrast to the situations of his readers. In both

"The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin" and "In Present Time," then, though in a different

way in each text, the reader is kept at a distance from Burroughs's writing. One could say

that the discursive framing or spacing between description and performance in "The Cut-

Up Method of Brion Gysin" has merely been exchanged for the social, geographical, and

temporal space that separates Burroughs from the reader of "In Present Time."

I propose that the persistence, in writing, of some form of this spacing, and not an

ontological re-evaluation of language, is the enduring discovery of Burroughs's

experiments with the cut-up. As in Derrida's use of the term, "spacing" in this sense is

restricted neither to textual effects, such as punctuation and typography, nor to the

historical and geographical dimensions of time and space. Spacing, like erasure and even

the "cut" of Burroughs's cut-up, "is to be thought of in the plural," as Gasché puts it in

his description of Derrida's "infrastructures" (*Tain* 185). Neither infinite nor pre-determined, it indicates an "open system" (Gasché, *Tain* 184) which is extended by supplementation, or the activation of a situation's inherent capacity to exceed itself, as successive situations arise. This means, however, that these situations are also defined according to structures of hierarchization and prioritization, so that spacing does not merely manifest homogenously across an undifferentiated reality.

Importantly, Burroughs's discovery includes the realization that the form of spacing's hierarchization is variable, as is apparent through its differing manifestations in "The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin" and "In Present Time." This variability, in turn, goes a long way toward explaining why much of Burroughs's most popular long-form writing seems to appeal to its readers through very different axes of interest, at some moments engaging readers in an outlandish fantasy universe and at others in direct criticism (sometimes more attributable to Burroughs's lifestyle and opinions than the immediate content of his writing) of very real societal problems. In all of these cases, however, Burroughs's most popular works distinguish themselves by presenting unique, engaging referential content that impacts its readership asymmetrically. Meanwhile, the often mentioned but rarely seriously analyzed cut-up experiments of *The Third Mind* (or at least those experiments in which the cut-up method is demonstrated most directly) are constrained by their failed attempts to equalize the author-reader relationship—for example, by fixating on Burroughs's coincidental surroundings, or, even less adventurously, on pure textual self-reflection.

In chapter 2, I defined the referential content retained by writing techniques such

as erasure or the cut-up method according to Derrida's concept of the *paleonym*. I also argued that the *paleonym* helps model an author's or a text's responsibility, which indicates the text's self-presentation as a potentially or quasi-transcendental form of communication in spite of its ultimate inability to achieve transcendentality in fact. One could further call this responsibility "style" if one understands the latter term, as Diana Hamilton does in "Style in Quotation Marks," as the legibility or coherency that "allows a text to take on the impossible specificity of the author-turned adjective," even when the dispersal and negation of authorship is the rule of its composition. It is the coherency of Burroughs's style, for instance, that prompts us to attribute the cut-up method to Burroughs's intentions and influence, even though his actual application of the method involved leaving important compositional decisions to chance. Hamilton's understanding of style in these terms is crucial to the analysis of a wide range of appropriation-based art and literature because, as she demonstrates, it refutes the belief that appropriation's assault on authorial intention is equivalent to a destabilization of literary meaning in general. First, Hamilton notes that the anti-individualistic impulse common to Cage, Mac Low, Burroughs, and the more recent critics who celebrate them often motivates an "allergy to style's theorization" based on simplistic reasoning: critics "relegate style to the individual, mourn the individual's recent demise, and then mourn style's relevance alongside it." Second, Hamilton shows that this reasoning is not borne out by evidence, since many poets' use of material appropriation and citation—which influential critics such as Douglas Crimp and Marjorie Perloff take as the gold standard of

postmodernism's attack on unified, authoritative structures of meaning[10]—actually "has

the effect of developing the style of the text instead of disrupting it." Hamilton suggests,

then, that while appropriation-based techniques destabilize the traditional link between

literary style and the subjective or private dimension of individual authorship, they retain

and even strengthen the stylistic unity that motivates authoritative channels of

interpretation.

      Burroughs exemplifies this notion of style for Hamilton, not because of the

specific technical features of his cut-up method but because of how their citational,

procedural outputs are incorporated into the more traditionally novelistic voice and

subject matter of Burroughs's later works. Rather than systematizing and purifying his

means of non-egoic appropriation—as Cage attempted throughout much of his career—or

simply accepting the inevitable incursion of intentional results—as Mac Low ultimately

did—Burroughs continually returned to and reworked the fragmentary effects of the cut-

up at the level of paragraphs and chapters while simultaneously incorporating more

---

[10] In his "Appropriating Appropriation," a short catalogue essay providing one of Hamilton's main points of comparison, Crimp explicitly differentiates the longer history of stylistic appropriation in art and architecture from the specifically postmodernist tactic of appropriating objects and materials, which he prefers. Praising Frank Gehry's architecture and its implicit critique of individual authorship, Crimp notes that "Gehry takes from history an actual object (the existing house), not an abstract style," further specifying that this practice "retains the historical lessons of modernism even as it criticizes modernism's idealist dimension from a postmodernist perspective" (128). While Perloff's scholarship, meanwhile, is not mentioned in Hamilton's essay, her support of Goldsmith and other Conceptual writers represents the literary counterpart of Crimp's attitude. Although Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius* outlines how writers since the modernists have attempted to challenge the conventional figure of the literary author, it emphasizes the success of literary works that use appropriation as a central strategy. Further, Perloff suggests that, within this category, methods of appropriation that specifically treat appropriated texts as material objects trump all other techniques for advancing the postmodernist paradigm. As she puts it, the form of "*citationality*" that is "central to twenty-first-century poetics" distinguishes itself through its recognition that we live in "an age of literally mobile or transferable text—text that can be readily moved from one digital site to another or from print to screen, that can be appropriated, transformed, hidden by all sorts of means and for all sorts of purposes. This is not Pound's 'Make it New!' but Jasper John's 'Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it'" (Perloff, *Unoriginal* 17).

conventionally coherent sentence-level narration. The result, especially in later works

such as those of *The Red Nights Trilogy*, is a style that belongs uniquely to Burroughs's

texts yet not wholly to a naïve or pre-critical assertion of Burroughs's authorial

intentionality. Burroughs's style, therefore, nuances or thickens the polarized binary of

non-egoic multiplicity and authorial unity that calcifies in Cage and Mac Low's writing.

Moreover, it does this in much the same way that Derrida's "writing under erasure"

reimagines the calcified positions of metaphysical thinking. Just as Derrida's

metaphysical *paleonyms* are inscribed within the arguments for their own dissolution, the

cut-ups' project of dispersing identity as it manifests in received language becomes

"internalized" or "take[n] up" in the second-order identity (or identifiability) of

Burroughs's stylistic output (Hamilton).

Hamilton's reading of style is immensely important for understanding the nuanced

series of reversals and returns constituted in contemporary erasure poetry, as well as for

distinguishing erasure's experimental tradition from that of the many critics and poet-

scholars (especially those associated with Conceptual writing and the institutionally

hegemonic interpretation of the American modernist avant-garde that underpins it) who

instead seek to double down on Cage and Mac Low's radicalism at the expense of a

plurality of concrete alternatives. Nonetheless, Hamilton's concluding affirmations of

(what she understands to be) the autonomy of style remain problematic, since they imply

that a certain unity and identity of writing (i.e., style) ultimately supersedes its

fragmentary effects. While this analytic *telos* is generally appropriate for Burroughs's

later texts, which tend to dissolve their appropriation-based experimental methods into

conventionally literary formats, its relevance is suspect in the case of works whose visual or contextual presentation (e.g., erasure poems' inclusion of negative space where their source texts have been erased) draws attention to disjunction and fragmentation. This is very much the case for Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, which I turn to in the remainder of this chapter. Moving forward from the failures of Burroughs's experiments with the cut-up method, the challenge is to understand how appropriation-based methodologies can thicken the interplay between linear, authoritative structures of meaning and the destabilization of these structures, but without having to revert to traditional literary genres (such as the novel) or qualities (such as style) as foundational categories. *A Humument*, I argue, stages this interplay across a huge variety of interpretive moments, making it an invaluable reference point for many of the diverse ways contemporary appropriation-based literature, and especially erasure poetry, intervenes in the processes of making meaning.

* * *

Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, an ongoing multi-volume project first begun in 1966, shares several fundamental characteristics with the cut-up experiments that inspired it. In both Burroughs's and Phillips's experimental works, new literary writing (which Phillips explicitly calls poetry) is produced by appropriating, re-ordering, and redacting other

authors' pre-existing texts. Phillips's work, however, distinguishes itself through a kind of

authorial activity that, while conventional in Western literature at least since the

Romantics, is excluded from Burroughs's, Cage's, and Mac Low's engagements with

appropriation. These earlier experimental writers understood their work as a way of

harnessing chaos and chance[11] to both undermine the role of the author and draw out the

underlying meaning and materiality of the texts they treated. In contrast, Phillips's means

of extracting his erasure poem from W. H. Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Document* are

based almost entirely on conscious selection, foregrounding the agency of Phillips's

personal tastes and intuitions in the manner conventionally associated with authorship.

Thus, where earlier experimentalists invoked the distinction between the materiality of

their source texts and the subjectivity of the author in order to severely disempower the

latter, Phillips maintains the importance of both aspects of literary production while

simultaneously stressing the asymmetry of their relationship. As Phillips puts it,

somewhat enigmatically, in a 2014 interview, "[Mallock] has no influence over the book,

except that he supplies the material. He conditions the book entirely but doesn't have any

influence over it." (Smyth et al. 130).

By incorporating, but also looking beyond, the duality of materiality and

subjectivity—or "conditioning" and "influence," as Phillips puts it—I argue that *A

Humument* exhibits a wide range of instances of what I call "asymmetrical

---

[11] There is somewhat more overlap between Burroughs's and Phillips's concerns than my statement implies. Phillips, for example, discusses the chance procedures used in *A Humument* at some length ("Notes," second revised ed.), and Burroughs makes clear that "[s]omebody has to program the machine; somebody has to *do* the cutting up. Remember that I first made selections. Out of hundreds of possible sentences that I might have used, I chose one" (Burroughs and Gysin 8).

collaboration," in which aspects of both the text and its context are brought to bear unequally on a shifting set of meaning-making trajectories. If Burroughs was most concerned with "cutting up" official discourses until they revealed truth and prophecy beneath their cracked surfaces, Phillips's motto is instead E. M. Forster's "only connect," which is repeated in various forms throughout *A Humument*. In Phillips's work, such connections preserve the strands of intentionality, linearity, and unity—what Deleuze and Guattari call "knots of arborescence" as they manifest within the rhizome (*Thousand* 20)—that artists like Cage vehemently sought to excise, yet they are also integrated into an ultimately groundless field of interpretation that makes their exact trajectory and impact subject to variation. *A Humument* is a more conservative text than the experimental works that preceded it, but the structure of this conservatism also distinguishes its more nuanced channels of textual intervention from the failed radicality of Deleuze and Guattari's radicale-systems. In this sense, Phillips's text is both a leading methodological influence for contemporary erasure poetry (in that most works now seen as erasures follow a method very similar to Phillips's) and a central historical demonstration of erasure's unique contribution to avant-garde experimentation and radical politics.

While *A Humument*'s genre is determined by Phillips's use of compositional methods from both the literary and the visual arts, its cumulative effect is to choreograph interactions far more complex than those between text and illustration. In the simplest terms, Phillips composed each page of *A Humument* by selecting fragments of text from Mallock's original page, isolating and emphasizing those fragments by boldly outlining

the space around them, and then drawing, painting, or collaging over all or most of the text left behind. Alongside Phillips's original images (which include figurative drawings, abstract designs, simple patterns and textures, and, in later editions, photographs) and the textual fragments he selects and preserves, Phillips's erasures often leave Mallock's text legible enough to allow readers to further interpret the connections (and disconnections) between *A Human Document*'s original presentation and Phillips's additions to the book. Once this is recognized, the potential interactions embodied by the text only continue to proliferate. Because Phillips works directly from the material surface of Mallock's pages without changing the positions of the fragments he selects, *A Humument* draws attention to the material presence and spatial configuration of *A Human Document*'s printed text as elements largely independent from its narrative. In other words, while the specific visual presentation of a work of literature (most notably its typesetting) is not normally considered part of the work, the fact that Phillips uses both *A Human Document*'s narrative and its visual presentation as sources retroactively establishes both as significant contributors to *A Humument*'s meaning.

In addition to pluralizing the visual and textual elements of the book in this way, *A Humument*'s staging of "a curious unwitting collaboration between two ill-suited people seventy-five years apart" (Phillips, "Notes," second revised ed.) deeply disrupts the assumption that the manifestation of the work is roughly congruent with its author's intentions. Even in collaborative works, most conventional understandings of collaboration (e.g., two authors working in tandem, or a secondary author working to clarify and normalize the writing of a primary author) suggest that the accredited authors

are in agreement over the content of the work, making the attribution of authorial

intention relatively unproblematic. In contrast, *A Humument* leaves open the question of

whether Mallock or Phillips (or both, or neither) can be said to have authored or

authorized any particular aspect of the book. This allows the two writers themselves to

act as additional nodes in the book's constellation of meaning, since their potential to

both reinforce and contradict each other further pluralizes its interpretive possibilities.

Overall, then, Phillips's method evokes a plurality of intratextual actors whose

interactions across *A Humument*'s pages allow for many kinds of reading. Most of these

actors are not the direct result of Phillips's inclusion of visual artwork in *A Humument*,

but are in fact inherent to his method of writing by erasure, which probably accounts for

why most contemporary erasures take Phillips's text as an explicit or implicit influence

despite the fact that few make use of any techniques from the visual arts. Nonetheless, the

interplay of illustration and narrativization unique to Phillips's erasures emphasizes how

A Humument draws connections across multiple levels of meaning-making. Moreover,

Phillips's method explicitly reflects the plurality of experiential dimensions implied by

any literary work. As Peter Schwenger puts it in *Fantasm and Fiction*, Phillips, "[w]hile

never letting us forget the material face of print on the page, […] also reminds us that the

page can produce colors, shapes, and textures. As his transformed pages accumulate to

correspond exactly to the number of pages in Mallock's original novel, they comment,

with visual eloquence, on the transformative power of any novel" (92). This

transformative power, Schwenger argues, is language's unique ability to convert the

materiality of printed letters into the imaginative experience of fictional worlds and

sentiments; it is aptly illustrated by Phillips's picture, on page 3 of *A Humument*,[12] of a torrent of clouds or water overflowing from the pages of a book. However, the notion of a transformative power in literature can also describe many of the other relationships forged between the actors whose meaning-making work intersects at the figure of the book: it could describe, for example, the transformation of an author's created meaning into a reader's interpreted meaning, or the transformation of an author's or a reader's subjectivity over the course of writing or reading something new. Additionally, *A Humument*'s status as a "transformed" book is itself complex, since, in the transformation of *A Human Document* into *A Humument*, either text could be identified by its material instantiation, its author's intention, its narrative content, or virtually any other literary aspect. When Schwenger states that Phillips "creates an art of double exposure (and at times double cross)" (*Fantasm* 92), this doubling should thus be understood as spanning, at different moments and in different creative and interpretive contexts, various dimensions of the experiential object called *A Humument*.

Schwenger himself captures this point in his comments on the various kinds of figure-ground relationships that manifest in the book. He writes that "[f]igure and ground give way to each other or function equivocally; semantic and imagistic elements change places in flickering ambiguous ways. Of course, at any moment a visual force may take on strength and focus. Yet no matter how vivid the image may be it is always embedded in the multiple, shifting levels of the reading experience" (Schwenger, *Fantasm* 97). It is

---

[12] Where not otherwise noted, all of the pages of *A Humument* I discuss are identical (excepting slight differences in the quality of reproduction) across the book's second revised (third), fourth, fifth, and final (sixth) editions.

worth adding that Schwenger's description of "semantic and imagistic elements" encompasses a plurality of both, including multiple narratives (e.g., Mallock's and Phillips's), different kinds of visual effects (e.g., the visual form of Mallock's text and the illustrative content of Phillips's images), and even traces of actors that are neither semantic nor imagistic (e.g., Mallock and Phillips themselves, insofar as they are concrete historical individuals). With this in mind, Schwenger's comment summarizes two important aspects of the structure of meaning in *A Humument*. First, he clarifies that the levels or dimensions of reading available to Phillips's reader do not form a rigid structure, but are instead a variable set in which relationships between elements of the book can be continuously established, diverted, reversed, and re-established. Nonetheless, Schwenger's figure-ground model also clarifies that the book's dimensions do not manifest as equal or symmetrical components of the reading experience, but instead take shape through provisional hierarchies or asymmetrical orderings. This is why I suggest that these relationships delimit trajectories of meaning-making; although they can always be rerouted or turned back, they also constitute, in any real moment of interpretation, a determinate direction and a provisional ordering of elements—whether temporal, spatial, causal, or definitional.

Among the most interesting results of Phillips's method is the extent to which his engagement with a single pre-existing text in its entirety contributes to the range of ways *A Humument*'s hermeneutic dimensions multiply and shift. On page 105 (fig. 1), for example, the partial preservation of Mallock's original page as a contiguous material entity beneath Phillips's painted and collaged additions makes it possible to read the

relationship between figure and ground in at least two inverse ways. According to the illusionistic spatial logic of the image, the bubbles of text Phillips preserves from *A Human Document* form parts of three abstract sculptures or columns occupying the picture's foreground. However, Phillips's preservation of traces (both on this page and throughout *A Humument*) of his material process allows the reader to recognize that, within the layering of the physical page, Mallock's text is in fact the background upon which Phillips painted the other components of his image, including the background of its pictorial space. Thus, while most interpretations of the page require the reader to determine its ordering of figure and ground, there are at least two possible trajectories of reading the page from front to back or vice versa. Further details included on the page only stress this variability and pluralize the possibilities. For instance, Phillips's picture portrays an abstract artwork in the background of its illusionistic space, but since this artwork is depicted using a paper collage, it is also the most built up or foregrounded section of Phillips's material page.

A HUMAN DOCUMENT. 105

in
her room
sat abstract
art

art

which
made
time penniless.
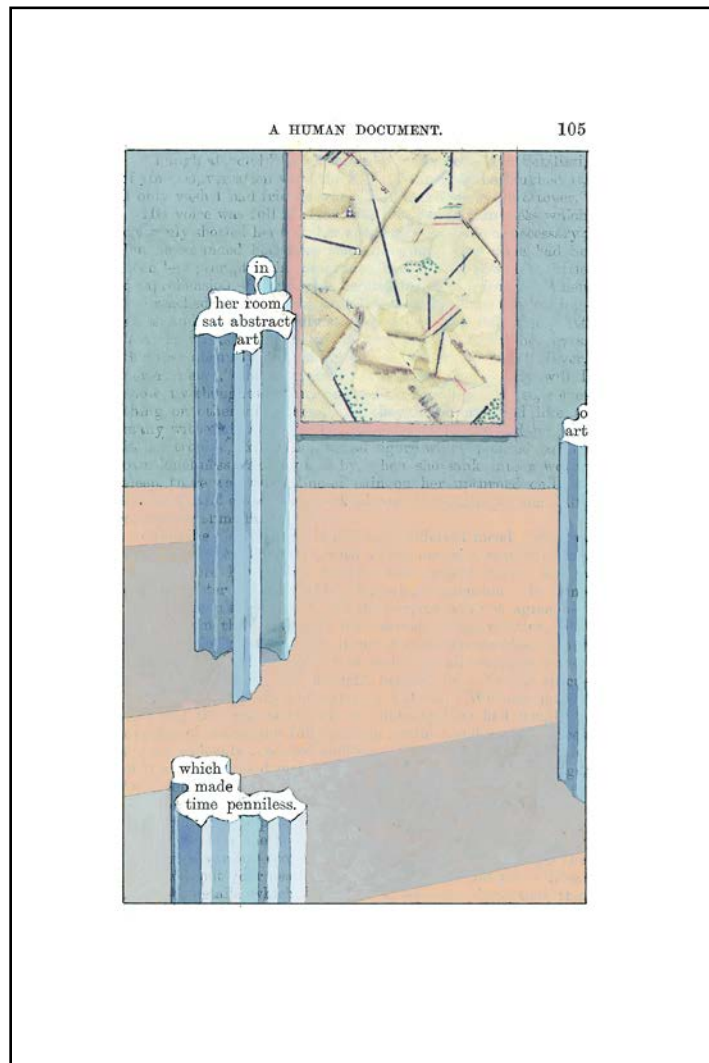
Fig. 1: Phillips, Tom. *A Humument Page 105* **(second version 1994).** © Tom Phillips,

DACS / SODRAC (2018)

A Humument's interplay between different dimensions of meaning, while

sometimes involving spatial dimensions of the kind described above, more frequently

extends to its rhetorical modes or diegetic functions. On page 105, all of the spatial

variability described above is further nuanced by the fact that the text, while acting as a

material and visual constituent of the objects depicted on the page, also plays the role of narrating or captioning the picture, reading "in / her room / sat abstract / art." Thus, the reader can, at different moments, read the text as spatially contiguous with the image (whether defined according to the illusionistic space of the picture or the material space of the page) or as part of an external, narrative dimension. While Phillips's fragments often ambiguously present themselves as belonging to different voices, they can also be integrated into variable dimensional orderings based on their imbrication with Phillips's structuring of spatial dimensions. This occurs in earlier editions' pages 221 and 249,[13] each of which deploys some text in a narrative or captioning mode—in which text fragments appear to float on the page like comic book speech bubbles, isolated from the visual logic of the image—and other text as part of a written note or letter included within the depicted scene. In this way, these textual fragments are distinguished not only by their roles in the spatiality of the image, but also by their rhetorical modes. Yet again, however, further complication stems from the enduring legibility of Mallock's original page and narrative under erasure, since, in Mallock's writing, all of the page's text is contiguous in both a spatial sense (as part of the same two-dimensional printed manuscript page) and a rhetorical sense (as part of the same running narrative). With all of these elements in play, readers may trace a trajectory of distinction and complementariness between Phillips's various rhetorical applications, or they may trace the fragmentation of Mallock's originally contiguous text into different spatial and diegetic layers. While neither of these

---

[13] Page 249 was reworked for the fifth edition onward, and page 221 was reworked for the final (sixth) edition.

trajectories is more correct or definitively more fruitful than the other, each requires

ordering the page's meaningful elements in a way that excludes (at least provisionally, in

order to establish a primary axis of interpretation) other interpretive directions.

Along the same lines as Cage's exploration of his text's "[m]aterial of five kinds"

in "Empty Words" (*Empty* 11), the multi-dimensionality of *A Humument*'s language often

emphasizes the sounds of words and syllables. Page 133 of the second revised edition

(fig. 2), for example, is filled with repeating, isolated nonsense words—"ting," "pring,"

"zi," "toop"—and similar sounding words—"king," "wing"—with text near the bottom

reading "hey. / Birds sang / last they / united a / garden," which functions to recast the

isolated words as bird sounds. Scattered nonsense words appear throughout many of

Phillips's pages, and they are often composed so that their pronunciation might indicate

the concept or tone they are meant to convey. In this sense, Phillips, unlike Cage,

sometimes implicates the sounds of words in narrative lines that seek to dissolve them

into immaterial, semantic meanings, holding these sounds in an asymmetrical relationship

with the signs to which they are linked.
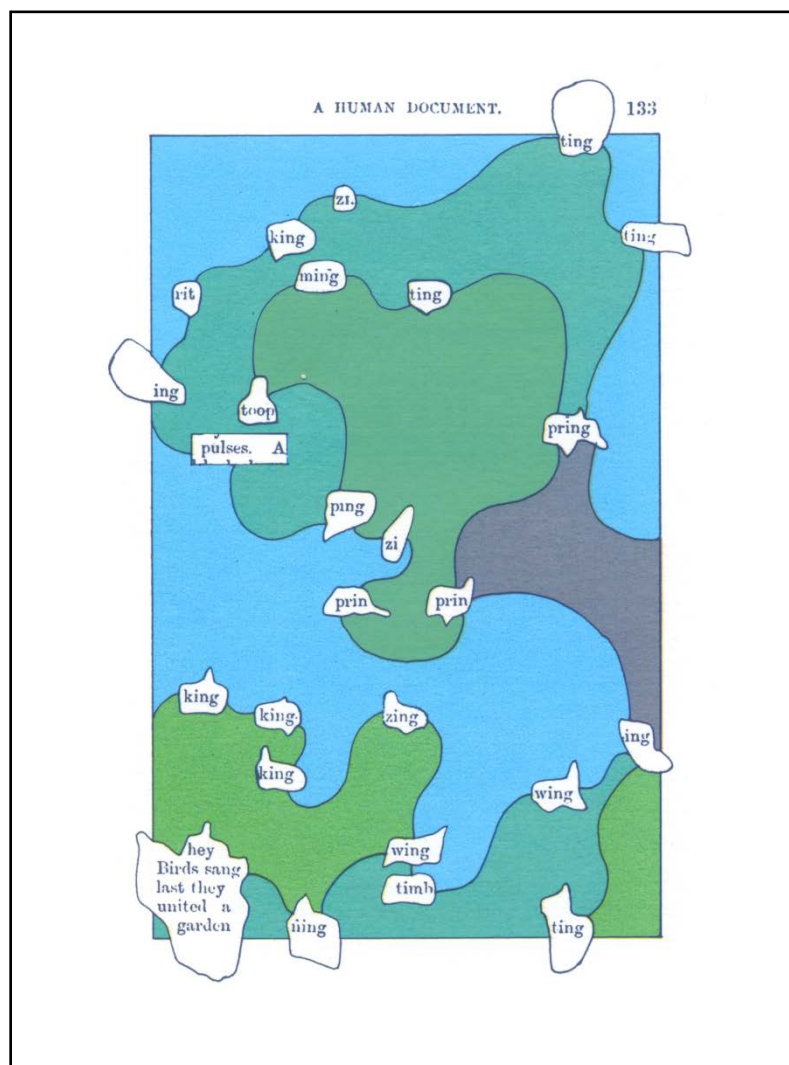
Fig. 2: Phillips, Tom. *A Humument Page 133* **(first version 1973).** © Tom Phillips,

DACS / SODRAC (2018)

Page 79 of the second revised and fourth editions highlights sound by describing

"a ring of music" in its central text, but its indication of where and how this music is

made manifest on the page is ambiguous. Surrounding the phrase are a text bubble

reading "score" and many tiny bubbles isolating letters such as "f," "p," and "pp,"

mimicking common abbreviations used in musical scores. It is possible, on one hand, to read the letters as indicators of their syllabic sounds, and thus as representatives of the "music" that would be constituted by and within Mallock's words and letters. Yet the fact that the letters, understood as parts of a musical score, instead represent paratexts indicating how an absent music should be played suggests, alternatively, that the semantic and visual properties of *A Human Document* resolve into silence—perhaps "this high silence / I call poetry," as Phillips describes it on page 143—or else defer to a sonic environment located outside the text. What is important is that both of these interpretations, although they terminate at roughly opposite conclusions, represent the movement between sound and semantics as a trajectory from one to the other. Regardless of how exactly music is brought into (or born out of) *A Humument*, Phillips's play on the relative silence of the book's printed text emphasizes the book's transitions and transformations between different dimensions of language. In other words, Phillips organizes these dimensions asymmetrically and non-simultaneously, downplaying the sense in which they could be seen as mirrored faces of the same unified meaning.

On page 46 (fig. 3), Phillips maps this dynamic onto the plurality of material, interpretive, and intentional dimensions made available by his method of erasure writing, further emphasizing the need to delineate particular interpretive trajectories alongside their potential for variation. The page depicts Toge, one of the main protagonists of Phillips's narrative, wearing bulky headphones, and images of what appear to be audio dials line the bottom of the frame. Along with text narrating "toge / trying / to receive / the / last words / on earth," the page is filled with word bubbles containing extractions

from the middle sections of words, such as "actica," asonab," and "ometh." These fragments indicate what Brian McHale, following John Shoptaw's concept of "lyric cryptography," refers to as "crypt-words" in the work of postmodernist poets such as John Ashberry, Charles Bernstein, and Lyn Hejinian ("Poetry" 282). Crypt-words, in McHale's definition, are well-known phrases implied by a poem's manifest text despite that text's actually using a less common phrase; for example, the common phrase "wake-up call" operates as a crypt-word for the title of Ashberry's "Hang-Up Call" (McHale, "Poetry" 282). For McHale, crypt-words demonstrate a poetic achievement of postmodernist "writing under erasure" in the Derridean sense, since they represent asymmetrical "doublets" in which one meaning, while generally being apprehended by the reader as a kind of absent presence, is erased and overwritten by the author's manifest text ("Poetry" 283).
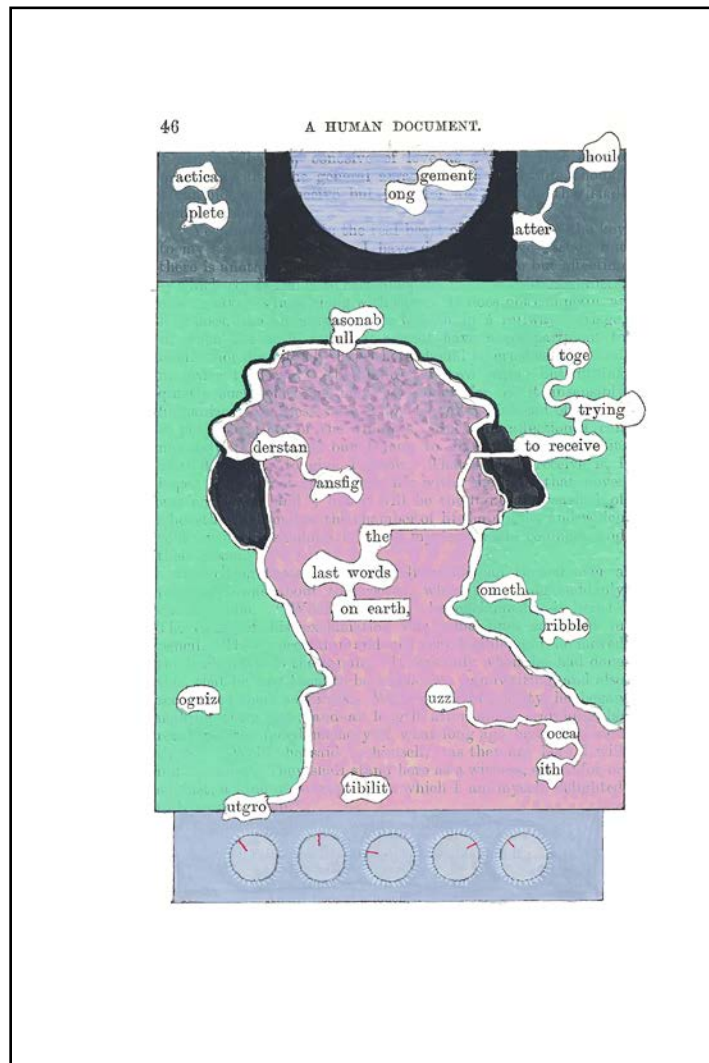
Fig. 3: Phillips, Tom. *A Humument Page 46* **(second version 1988).** © Tom Phillips,

DACS / SODRAC (2018)

Like McHale's examples of lyric cryptography, Phillips's word fragments

pluralize the textual dimensions at work in *A Humument*'s page 46 by motivating the

reader to think through the materiality of language—that is, both its sound and its

appearance—in order to arrive at an underlying, implied meaning. The role of materiality,

however, is different in each case. In McHale's crypt-words, the materiality of language is foregrounded insofar as it facilitates the cryptographic doubling of meaning: it is because of and via the material fact of (total or partial) homophony that two distinct meanings can adhere to the same manifest text. McHale's crypt-words therefore highlight the materiality of language alongside its sense. In contrast, Phillips's page 46 links materially intrusive yet nearly senseless word fragments to crypt-words whose material dimension, once the intended meaning is determined, has faded almost entirely into irrelevance. Phillips's page 46, especially with reference to its image's and narrative text's theme of sonic reception and interpretation, thus presents the gap between materiality and sense as a concrete space (or, equivalently, a duration) to be traversed, not as an artificial distinction to be eliminated. Instead of representing a formal yet insubstantial difference, the double/crossing of materiality and sense in Phillips's work manifests as a plurality of interpretive trajectories that transform one dimension into the other.

Moreover, the intersection of the materiality-sense axis with another asymmetrically ordered dimensional crossing—that of Mallock's and Phillips's authorship—further nuances the meaning-making trajectories available within Phillips's page 46, and not always or exclusively by multiplying their end-points. This is because the reader, knowing that Phillips's fragments are extracted from words originally authored by Mallock, can proceed in two non-congruent directions. In the first place, readers can attempt to interpret each fragment in terms of what Phillips, taken provisionally as the single author of *A Humument*, might have intended it to express. In

other words, readers could match each fragment to a word that would fit with the lexicon of commonly used words, the vocabulary Phillips would have expected to share with his readership, and the narrative context of *A Humument* and page 46 in particular. Alternatively, however, readers can attempt to interpret each fragment as the word Mallock intended to write, and did write, on page 46 of *A Human Document*. This reading trajectory involves, on one hand, a different set of contextual judgments—now the reader is concerned with the common vocabulary of Mallock's era and the narrative context of *A Human Document*—but it also involves concretely different acts of reading. In addition to simply speculating on the author's intentions, readers can attempt to visually apprehend the erased letters from Mallock's page (which, on Phillips's page 46, are partially legible) or even to compare Phillips's book with an unaltered edition of *A Human Document*, as I have done.

In some cases this second reading trajectory leads to the result one would expect when reading according to the first trajectory, in which Mallock's original intention is ignored. For example, "derstan" and "ansfig," which in isolation seem to indicate the words "understand" and "transfigure," do in fact correspond to those words in *A Human Document* (Mallock 25). In other cases, the second trajectory leads to a result the first interpretative route likely could not have predicted, as when "ribble" and "uzz" are revealed to be fragments of *A Human Document*'s "scribbled" and "puzzled" (Mallock 26). This observation is crucial because it demonstrates that a plurality of trajectories for moving between textual dimensions (e.g., between the material fragment and Phillips's crypt-word, or between the material fragment and Mallock's original word) does not

necessarily correspond to a multiplicity of interpretive end-points or meanings. It is because both reading trajectories may or may not lead to the same meaning that the trajectories are genuinely different—that is, as trajectories with their own constitutions and contents "on the way" to meaning. The difference between McHale's crypt-words and Phillips's fragments, then, can be described as the difference between "polysemy" and "dissemination" that Derrida insists on in *Dissemination*: while the former indicates a dispersed multiplicity of meanings constituting "the *horizon* […] of some integral reading" (350), the second indicates a plurality of voices that concretely transpose, transform, and erase meaning. Phillips's ability to establish this difference is rooted in the unique combination of features inherent to his method of erasure writing: in this method, the appropriation and manipulation of a material text across time and space is intertwined with the interplay of authorial intentions across distinct literary contexts.

* * *

A Humument is often presented as a parody of Mallock's *A Human Document*, and this label aptly summarizes three key characteristics of Phillips's approach: the sharpness of Phillips's subversions of Mallock's tone and intentions, the playfulness with which Phillips writes through Mallock's relative austerity, and the degree to which Phillips artistically and intellectually elevates Mallock's subject matter by repeating it ironically.

In fact, *A Humument*'s parodic qualities have become indissociable from its influence on contemporary understandings of erasure as a poetic method. However, the manner in which *A Humument* performs parody has been described in a variety of ways that cannot be easily assimilated, revealing not only a multiplicity of parodic instances in the text, but also a plurality of trajectories through which readers can take up parodic positions regarding Mallock's and Phillips's work. This variance, in turn, reflects important differences between some of the ways erasure as a writing method can be thematized.

At perhaps the most explicit level, Phillips's disparaging assertion that Mallock "emerges from his works as a snob and a racist" ("Notes," second revised ed.) cues readers and commentators to see Phillips's appropriation and manipulation of Mallock's book as a statement of direct political opposition. Erasure, in this view, is an act of righteous violence performed against bad, or at least fatally antiquated, politics. Yet more scholarly discussions of Phillips's work tend to understand its application of parody according to structural contexts rather than content-specific positions. For Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, for example, Phillips's text is a parody "in the postmodern sense of the word," meaning it "does not necessarily mock or reject, but rather sets up a self-conscious, critical distance between the original and the new text." Where Mallock's introduction emphasizes how textual documentation can authoritatively reconstitute authentic identity—evoking, as Mallock puts it, "the voice of a living woman […] confessing to me" (viii)—Phillips exploits the fissures in this model in order to present identity (most forcefully his own, as author) as instead constantly shifting, playfully intertextual, and never amenable to authoritative definition. Yet Gill Partington, while

tacitly following Wagner-Lawlor's "postmodern" sense of parody, sees Phillips playing

Mallock's textual authority not against the fluidity of identity, but against the materiality

of the book and the page—"what physically lies underneath the text" (68). To complicate

the ascription of parody still further, both Wagner-Lawlor and Partington connect *A*

Humument's parodic qualities to its playful exposition of erotic undercurrents in

Mallock's relatively uptight Victorian style. By drawing on the distinctly Freudian themes

of humour and repressed sexuality, both critics thus emphasize Phillips's expression of

some well-known features of generic parody that nonetheless have no inherent

connection to the sense of political opposition brought out by judgments of Mallock's

classism and racism. Instead of an aggressive act of censorship, erasure in Wagner-

Lawlor's and Partington's sense takes the form of a broadly provocative yet politically

neutral exploration of *A Human Document*'s thematic strata.

As with many aspects of *A Humument*, it seems inaccurate to limit Phillips's

performance of parody to a single essential trait, since the book includes a range of

gestures that could be classified under the umbrella of parody. In other words, what one

reads as parody in *A Humument* varies widely based on the explicit and implicit context

one brings to the passage, one's expectations of what parody is and how Phillips

conforms to it, and the page and edition one is reading. But this does not only mean that

A Humument casts parody as a multiplicity of inassimilable species. More poignantly, the

book's explosion of the category of parody also challenges the distinction between

parodic and non-parodic reading and reproduction. Alongside pages that are more

palpably subversive, Phillips often presents treatments of *A Human Document* in which

his departure from Mallock's intentions is intermingled with more or less

unproblematized contiguity.

For example, page 39 of the second revised through fifth editions, which reads,

"Grenville, / scanned the sofa, to see / Miss Markham, / raising her / dress / half parted,"

first seems like a slyly erotic hijacking of Mallock's style, corresponding to the playful

mode of parodying repressive texts described above. However, by checking the erased

text of Mallock's novel—which Phillips leaves almost entirely legible on this page—the

reader finds that the original narrative is already erotically charged: in it, Grenville

(Mallock's protagonist) jealously evaluates two of Miss Markham's admirers, after which

Miss Markham flirtatiously offers him a seat next to her. Most critics acknowledge that

the subjects of Phillips's parody, whether sexual or not, are better understood as

exaggerations of Mallock's themes than as entirely new additions. But it could be further

argued, especially with a nod to Michel Foucault's critique of the "repressive

hypothesis,"[14] that Phillips's interpretation is in fact no more sexual than Mallock's. In

this sense, the reader might refer to Phillips's work as an illustration or even a translation

of Mallock's before calling it a parody. The point, though, is that Phillips frequently

troubles any attempt to draw hard lines between these categories.

Both versions of Phillips's page 133 are remarkable in their employment of

distinctly visual and material effects—which, according to Partington, play a large part in

---

[14] See Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, especially pages 1-15. Foucault's reasoning would suggest that while *A Humument* makes *A Human Document*'s treatment of sexuality more explicit, both books are responsible for "the over-all 'discursive fact,' the way in which sex is 'put into discourse'" (Foucault 11).

subverting Mallock's non-materialist "absorptive" reading[15]—to illustrate *A Human Document* in ways that in fact offer no significant departure from Mallock's plot, theme, or tone. On this page of the original novel, Irma (Grenville's love interest) sends a note asking Grenville to accompany her on a walk at eleven o'clock, Grenville agrees, and the two stroll jovially through a picturesque spring scene marked by sunshine, flowers, and a "river which comes flowing out of the woods and valleys" (Mallock 139). In the page included in *A Humument*'s fourth, fifth, and final (sixth) editions (fig. 4), Phillips reproduces essentially the same narrative. The page reads:

> morning.
> eleven?—IRMA
> "Yes"
>
> charm
> freedom
> breath
> and
> sunlight
> At eleven
>
> Sunshine
> bells   magnolias
> princes
> and lions and
> happiness
> happiness
> beside her,
>
> behind the
> river
> Birds sang with
> the

---

[15] In Partington's rendition of the concept, "absorptive" reading refers to the conventional mode of imaginative engagement in which we read "'through' [the novel's] pages and enter the narrative world beyond" (70).

united
garden

In addition to these selections, Phillips illustrates the scene with images of trees, a wheat field, a meadow with flowers, a river, and a large clock face whose hands indicate eleven o'clock. But Phillips also uses these visual elements, and especially their interaction with the materiality of Mallock's original text, to add further nuance to the experience of the narrative. While most of Phillips's text is surrounded by standard rounded bubbles, Irma's "eleven?" is given a squared border, and Grenville's "Yes" is bordered by jagged lines; in this way, Phillips uses a visual yet non-mimetic signifying system (similar to the codes used in comic book illustration) to convey both the materiality of Irma's note and the alternation to Grenville's voice in his enthusiastic reply, "Yes." Further, the thin white line[16] that connects "behind the / river" to "Birds sang with / the / united / garden" crosses over the pictorial river Phillips draws on the surface of the page. According to Partington's argument, this appeal to the spatiality of the page and the interactivity of visual and textual components should demonstrate a profound subversion of Mallock's authorial intention and narrative structure. Yet Phillips, particularly on page 133, conspicuously designs the material experience of his page's components to parallel the "absorptive" experience of Mallock's novel—for example, by having readers encounter "Birds" behind the illustrated river on the surface of Phillips's page just as they would encounter Mallock's birds behind the river described in *A Human Document*'s narrative.

---

[16] Contributing a further dimension of play to this page is the fact that Phillips, in his notes to *A Humument*, uses the term "rivers" to refer to these strings of blank space, which indicate the reading sequence of Phillips's selected words throughout *A Humument*. See below for more discussion of Phillips's "rivers."
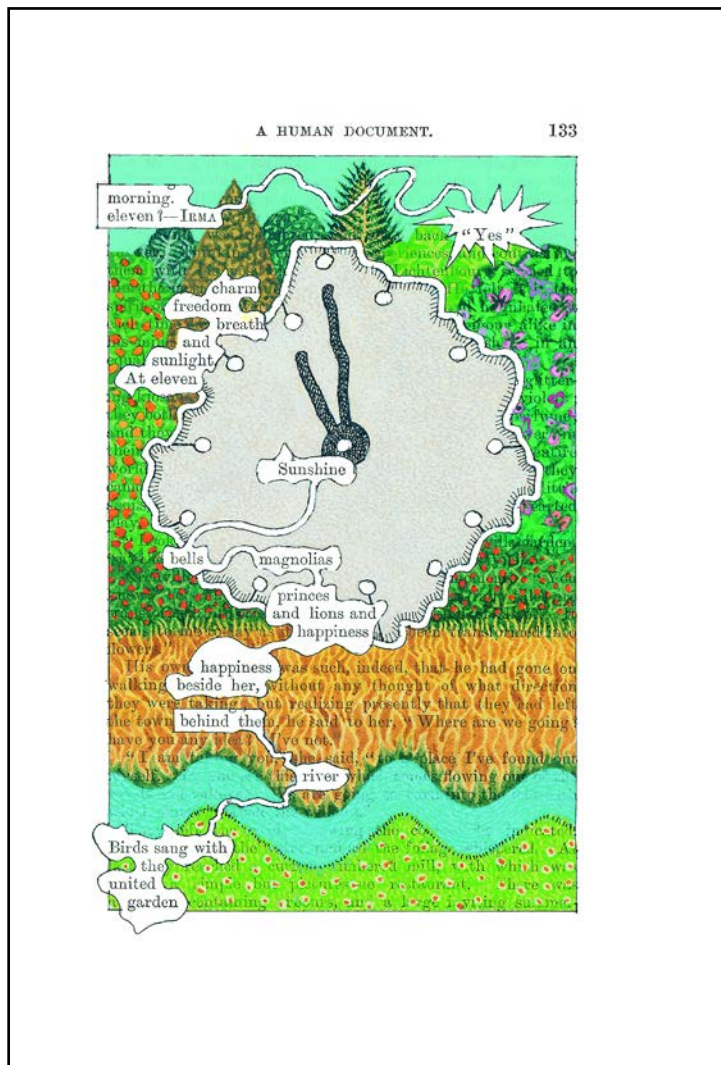
Fig. 4: Phillips, Tom. *A Humument Page 133* **(second version 2004).** © Tom Phillips,

DACS / SODRAC (2018)

Although the second revised edition's version of Phillips's page 133 (fig. 2,

above) does not retell Mallock's narrative as thoroughly as other editions' versions, it

similarly employs *A Humument*'s material components to augment the narrative

experience Mallock intends in *A Human Document*. As discussed earlier, the page, which

is illustrated with an abstract design of a green tree against a blue sky, is filled with

nonsense words representing bird sounds alongside a longer text bubble that reads "hey. /

Birds sang / last they / united a / garden." This version of page 133 exploits and disrupts

the materiality of Mallock's printed page in two significant ways. First, it breaks down

Mallock's words into syllables that are meant to be heard rather than decoded. Second, it

fissures Mallock's originally homogeneous text into two distinct components: one that

represents non-semantic sounds, and another that performs a semantic narrativization of

those sounds. In comparison with the conventional, linear, "absorptive" reading with

which one could adequately approach the same page in Mallock's novel, Phillips's page

requires the reader to invent unconventional means of interpretation and analysis in order

to uncover its capacity for signification and storytelling. Phillips thus makes reading the

text more difficult or resource-intensive, replicating a strategy that scholars of the artist's

book frequently associate with that genre's interrogation and defamiliarization of reading

as such.[17] What interests me, however, is the extent to which *A Humument* does not

preserve and reinforce this difficulty but instead encourages its resolution. Although

reading Phillips's page requires more effort (and perhaps a few more double takes and

additional runs through) than reading Mallock's, Phillips almost certainly does expect us

to read and understand it, at which point we are free to pursue an "absorptive"

---

[17] Michelle H. Strizever's *Visible Texture*, one of the most thorough studies of the textuality of artist's books, frequently turns to the difficulty of reading artist's books as an indication of their "unconventionalizing of reading" (62). Difficulty in the artist's book can be linked to a variety of factors, including narrative ambiguity, excessive framing or paratexts, and even the physical strain of apprehending obscured or unusual letter forms.

comprehension of the page in harmony with the experience of Mallock's narrative.

In the manner of a Derridean supplement,[18] Phillips's work problematizes our ability to define it either as a fatal dismantling of Mallock's communicative apparatus or as a benign accompaniment to *A Human Document*'s story. My contention, however, is that it also does not fix our attention on this state of problematization as such (since such a fixation would once again ossify and essentialize the dynamism of the problem),[19] but instead develops it into a spectrum of reading experiences. This is apparent when comparing Phillips's second revised edition's page 133 (fig. 2, above) with page 46 (fig. 3, above), which employs a similar technique of isolating nonsense words from Mallock's text in order to emphasize their sonic qualities. Despite the pages' shared technique for linking the materiality of printed words to the materiality of sound, page 46 parlays the resulting reading experience into a setting, tone, and theme that cannot be easily folded back into Mallock's story. Far from illustrating *A Human Document*'s narrative, this page would more likely be read as an imaginative tangent whose apocalyptic scenario and depictions of modern technology owe nothing to Mallock's literary vision, or else as a

---

[18] See part II, chapter 2 of *Of Grammatology*, "…That Dangerous Supplement…."

[19] In this regard, my application of Derrida's notion of supplementarity to *A Humument* differs from Partington's. For him, "*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" (77). Although I agree with Partington in principle, I contend that the "impossib[ility]" of determining a "definitive" text is nonetheless accompanied by concrete reading experiences in which certain interpretations are treated as definitive, if only for the practical purpose of carrying on with the reading. The formal "impossibility" of locating a "definitive, originary text," in other words, is paradoxically accompanied by the concrete possibility of acting as if one had in fact been located. Moreover, I contend that these concrete experiences are inseparable from *A Humument*'s supplementarity. This is to say that if Partington takes the Derridean "supplement" as an alternative to the "originary text," then I take the supplement as an alternative to the binary of an "originary text" and "continual reworking and unfinishing."

way of poking fun at the irrelevance of Mallock's dated and somewhat arcane prose style.

Either way, what is important is that page 133 and page 46 diverge from Mallock's

intentions both in different ways and to different degrees, with page 133, by my

reckoning, coming much closer to converging with its source text.

Page 46 also helps demonstrate that compete divergence between Phillips's

supplementary text and its source is as concretely impossible as complete convergence.

Despite the relatively jarring juxtaposition of Phillips's futuristic scene and Mallock's

Victorian setting, the premise of Toge's "trying / to receive / the / last words / on earth"

distantly resonates with the treated scene from *A Human Document*, in which Grenville

rediscovers some "faint and not very legible" verses written in his notebook, then sets

himself to "deciphering" them (Mallock 26). This tenuous resonance, of course, is

accompanied by a more literal link between Phillips's and Mallock's works, in that the

former relies on the direct appropriation and recycling of the latter's printed material. But

the double/crossing of these two lines of descent only reinforces my claim about the

tonal, political, and stylistic variety of Phillips's application of the erasure method. If the

material grounding of Phillips's nonsense words in Mallock's authorized text validates

the common wisdom that parody implies a deep involvement with its target, the

underlying resonance between Phillips's and Mallock's analogies of "receiv[ing]" or

"deciphering" seems to dispense with parody entirely, conveying the impression that

Phillips's work is instead a supplement in the conventional sense—or the *paleonymic*

sense, in contrast to the very different emphasis Derrida places on "that dangerous

supplement" in *Of Grammatology* (141). In spite of critics' drive to make our experiences

of reading more definitive, Phillips consistently demonstrates that distinctly parodic,

genre-bending, and otherwise materially limit-breaking trajectories of literary

experimentation can still share space with more earnest instances of reproduction and

homage.

This conclusion carries significant consequences for Phillips's critical and

political positioning, both as a respondent to Mallock's literary legacy and as the bearer

of a particular responsibility for authoring and disseminating[20] *A Humument*. My analysis

of *A Humument*'s means of engaging in an asymmetrical collaboration with *A Human

Document* suggests a relationship that cannot be classified either as oppositional or as

faithful without significant ambiguity, and it is plausible that this ambiguity is a

significant source of critics' tendency to shuttle between different understandings of

parody when describing the book. Yet differences between critics' treatments of Phillips's

and Mallock's collaboration are not random; instead, it appears that the tendency to

depict certain aspects of the relationship in terms of opposition and others in terms of

recovery and reproduction is closely linked to the political expediency of each. On the

topic of *A Humument*'s portrayal of textuality, critics such as N. Katherine Hayles portray

Phillips's treatment of Mallock as a parody "in the postmodern sense of the word," as

Wagner-Lawlor puts it, emphasizing the degree to which Mallock's and Phillips's texts

---

[20] While this term refers, on one hand, to Phillips's formal agreement to publish the work—in other words, his claim to proprietary rights—it also encompasses the active, concrete processes of continually introducing and reintroducing the work into larger cultural discourses. This latter definition is particularly applicable in Phillips's case, since the published text of *A Humument* extends far beyond a single printed volume. In fact, *A Humument*'s content appears across visual artworks, musical scores, scripts and performances, and the wide range of sequential and spinoff printed and electronic editions (including a website and an iPhone app) that Phillips has released over 50 years of work on the project.

form a contiguous hypertextual network in which the latter uncovers and expands on ideas already established by the former. Conversely, commentaries that address the racist and classist socio-political theories espoused by *A Human Document* acknowledge no such contiguity, instead relying on assumptions about Phillips's personal political beliefs in order to portray his work as a direct criticism of Mallock's

This is to say that, between the textuality and the politics of *A Humument* and *A Human Document*, critical consensus reflects a double standard. Regarding textuality, critics like Hayles stress the books' demonstrations, both independently and collaboratively, of what she calls "hypertextual profusion" (*Writing* 81), a term that spans intertextuality, intermedia, and the dissolution of linear reading into multiple reading trajectories. Hypertextuality, for Hayles, is both represented and embodied by several dimensions of Mallock's and Phillips's books, including their narratives and framing narratives, their materiality as book objects, and the status of their authorship. While Mallock, in his fictional introduction to *A Human Document*, imagines a hypertextual origin for his book in the form of a scrapbook (i.e., a loose collection of photographs, diary entries, and letters exchanged between two lovers) that the novel's putative editor "smooth[es]" into "one coherent narrative" (Hayles, *Writing* 79), Phillips "seeks to bring into view again this suppressed hypertextual profusion" (Hayles, *Writing* 80) by treating Mallock's actual publication as a material hypertext (Hayles, *Writing* 88). Nonetheless, such variations are inherent to the overarching model of hypertextuality itself; thus, Hayles ultimately asserts that the representations and embodiments of hypertextuality across both books are thoroughly interconnected, non-hierarchically organized, and never

entirely distinct. In other words, *A Human Document* and *A Humument* can be said to share a single "hypertextual profusion."

In this regard Hayles, like most other notable critics of Phillips's project, is greatly indebted to the structuralist and poststructuralist methods of literary analysis exemplified by Barthes's description of texts as "tissue[s] of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). To put this another way, Hayles's and others' analyses discard "theological" reconstructions of authorial intention (Barthes 146) in favour of a broader attention to a network of textual events and their socio-cultural situation. When it comes to *A Humument*'s politics, however, critical analysis has been less forthcoming, less nuanced, and less consistent with this text-based approach. By preferring to take Phillips's dismissals of Mallock's racism and classism—and, for that matter, Mallock's racism and classism themselves—at face value, commentators stop short of investigating the relationship between *A Humument*'s hypertextuality and the political positions it communicates. Instead, they often rely on authorial intention to shore up their belief that Phillips's political positions (or, more pressingly, the political positions he is responsible for disseminating) can be sharply distinguished from Mallock's, even when the two authors' portrayals of the less politicized ideas surrounding textuality and hypertextuality are acknowledged to be closely linked.

Alan Woods's review of the book, for example, implies that *A Humument* maintains an anti-racist position by noting Phillips's use of "a poetry of protest culled from Mallock" in an artwork, otherwise unrelated to *A Humument*, whose imagery and title demonstrate a condemnation of apartheid (257). But perhaps the most superficial

example of this analytic approach underlies Ruth Sackner's (one of Phillips's principle patrons) comment that "[a]lthough [Phillips] claims not to be a policital [sic] artist, South Africa and the Berlin Wall are the subjects of several of his paintings" (77). Though the comment may be more appropriate to Phillips's other artworks, it captures the common impulse to define *A Humument*'s politics through the smattering of pages that reference events such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (141), the ascendance of the Nazi Third Reich (153), and (since the fifth edition) the September 11th attack on New York's World Trade Center (4). Closer attention to these pages, however, reveals both that they are anomalous in their relative lack of engagement with Mallock's original material and that their political stances on the events they reference are largely ambiguous. To take these pages as indications of Phillips's (presumably liberal) politics means relying almost entirely on the context of Phillips's career and biography, ignoring *A Humument*'s imbrication with its source text and assuming that Phillips's stark opposition to Mallock's politics can be cleanly isolated from the complex mixing of intentions and effects in their works' hypertextual dimension.

If Phillips's perspective is taken as the starting point of analysis, it is easy to separate Mallock's politically reprehensible characteristics from his more laudable, creative ones, which include not only his depiction of hypertextuality in *A Human Document*'s introduction, but also the "rich and lush" vocabulary Phillips finds so nourishing for his own project ("Notes," second revised ed.). After all, distinguishing these characteristics is congruent with Phillips's artistic aims. From Mallock's perspective, however, the separation is much more problematic, and it is worth exploring

how Mallock's treatment of (hyper)textuality in *A Human Document* in fact reflects and reinforces its explicit racism and classism. This link is fixed by the novel's mapping of "poetry"—which stands for soulful life, honest expression, romance, imagination, and the pastoral setting of Hungary—against "prose"—which stands for worldly business, artistic craft, social status, labour, and the cosmopolitan setting of Italy—and, most importantly, the protagonists' ultimate preference for a balance between them (Mallock 143). Toward the end of the novel, Grenville expresses this balance as a state in which one is liberated to experience both categories while maintaining one's agency as paramount. He writes,

> I feared till very lately that my practical ambition had possibly taken root in me because my sense of life's poetry was dead, and that, if I gained the world, I should find I had paid my soul for it. But my experience in Hungary has shown me that my fear was false. Poetry, love, the ideal, has here come back to me, with all its old fascinations, but free from its old danger. The romance which I once sought to enjoy by personally enslaving myself to it, I enjoy now with the freedom of an artistic spectator; and I enjoy it all the more in life, because I am not troubled by it in my own life. Here is the difference between this romance and the other. I belonged to the other. This belongs to me. (Mallock 154)

Because it mediates between the spheres of aesthetic or textual composition and social or political representation, Mallock's framework allows him to extend his philosophy in two directions without disrupting its consistency. On the one hand, the above argument underlies Mallock's interest in the materially fragmented hypertextuality Hayles finds so

fascinating. In another context, however, it reinforces the classist and racist political

positions contemporary critics find so reprehensible.

Regarding the first case, the imagined editor who narrates Mallock's introduction

demonstrates his desire for "prose" in his endeavour to refashion the scrapbook that

provides his narrative's source into a coherent and publishable document. Yet the editor's

motivation for pursuing the project at all—and, presumably, Mallock's reason for

including the editor's framing narrative alongside the main text of *A Human Document*—

stems from his deep respect for the scrapbook's "poetry." Most notably, this respect is

linked not only to the scrapbook's inclusion of more honest and personal (though

literarily unsophisticated and technically bad) forms of writing, but also to its

fragmentation. In this sense, Mallock can be said to pre-emptively implicate Phillips's

erasure methodology in his balance of "prose" and "poetry"; while employing a variety

of descriptions that are also hauntingly appropriate to Phillips's work, Mallock's

imagined editor writes,

> The deeper the emotions [the scrapbook's author] had to express, the more
>
> crude and fragmentary was the form in which she attempted to express
>
> them; and the result was that her baffled and crippled sentences, her abrupt
>
> transitions, and odd lapses of grammar, though they could hardly be said
>
> to constitute a good description of what she professed to have felt, seemed
>
> to be more than that; they seemed to be a visible witness of its reality, as if
>
> her language had been broken by it, like a forest broken by a storm, or as
>
> if it were some living tissue, wounded and quivering with sensation. (viii-

ix)

Like Grenville, the editor wishes to experience the singularity and non-normative sentiment of "poetry" by mixing it with the controlling "prose" of literary craftsmanship, practical effort, and aesthetic distance. Neither element should be excluded: even as the scrapbook by itself is poorly suited for publication and dissemination as literature, the editor is clear in stating that its acceptance as literature is less important than its being a true expression of emotion—or as he calls it, "a human document" (Mallock xvii).

Hayles's analysis demonstrates that Mallock's editor's and Phillips's compositional methods are essentially opposite: while Mallock's editor attempts to make a hypertext more linear, Phillips can be seen as making a relatively linear text more hypertextual. Still, both approaches coincide in their interest in maintaining a form of balance between the "poetry" and the "prose" of the texts they treat, and this is where Phillips risks becoming caught up with Mallock's more unsavoury political positions. This is because, for Mallock, the same balance—although it represents a kind of compromise or mid-point on the axis of "poetry" and "prose"—also justifies *A Human Document*'s harsh social critique of "the democratic spirit" (in contrast to the aristocratic [Mallock 54]), as well as the development of this critique through Grenville's racially charged revulsion with the bourgeoisie. Upon entering the Vienna apartment of Irma's husband, Grenville discovers a room of objects whose glut of normative beauty and ostentatious monetary worth is matched by its lack of any sense of singularity or spirit. These objects include "some fine vases and candelabra, but they seemed arranged for sale rather than ornament" (Mallock 223), and, laying eyes on the room, Grenville remarks

that "[t]here were no traces of life in it" (Mallock 222). The apartment, in other words, is

rich in prose but destitute in poetry. And the difference, to Grenville, between this

profound lack of balance and the aristocratic life he prefers is practically insurmountable;

comparing the Vienna apartment to Irma's charming Hungarian drawing room, he

suggests that "[t]hey seemed to belong to two wholly different universes—designed for

the lives of people who had not a thought in common" (Mallock 223). Once this radical

difference is acknowledged, Mallock needs to proceed only slightly further to assert the

corresponding racial divide *A Human Document* ultimately configures as anti-Semitism.

It is a passage just prior to Grenville's description of the bourgeois apartment, in which

Irma, having arrived in Vienna, is whisked away by a repulsive acquaintance, that offers

the most noticeable evidence of Mallock's racism.[21] The book's narration describes the

acquaintance as "a tall corpulent man, whose hands glistened with rings, and who, with

the aid of his nose, suggested finance and Israel" (Mallock 221-22).

Certainly, Mallock's views on textuality, personal taste, political relations, and

racial difference are far from being perfectly consistent, and the analogies he uses to

connect them do not represent an indissoluble contiguity. Nonetheless, it is difficult to

assert that Phillips's treated text offers any specific critique of the shaky connections that

buttress Mallock's portrayal of his ideas as a conceptual whole. To the contrary, I have

suggested that Phillips's application of erasure preserves and extends many of the

---

[21] Contrary to the impression left by Phillips, there is not much of this evidence in *A Human Document*. This is at least the case in the American edition of *A Human Document* I have referred to, which Phillips suggests differs from the original British version due only to "some cutting (mainly of French words in the original)" ("Notes" second revised ed.).

contiguous aspects of Mallock's novel without clearly untangling the various threads (e.g., characters, themes, settings, plotlines, aesthetic positions, and political opinions) that are presented as contiguous by the form and idea of the novel itself (i.e., both as a consistent narrative and as a single material object). Phillips's methodological interpretation of erasure, moreover, reinforces his preservation of Mallock's ideas at a variety of levels. Aside from their partial reproduction of Mallock's work both aesthetically and materially, Phillips's efforts are responsible for the reintroduction of *A Human Document* into the sphere of literary publication and consumption. As Partington informs Phillips in an interview, "Mallock is back in print now. So you've revived him" (Smyth et al. 113). Of course, this form of reproduction is also partial, as Partington adds that "[p]eople now will read Mallock after reading *A Humument*, and so they're reading Mallock as a secondary text" (Smyth et al. 114). One might also say that *A Human Document*'s recent reprints, such as the 2005 facsimile edition on which I have based my analysis, appear only and always under erasure by Phillips's hand. Inseparable from this form of reproduction, however, is the persistent risk that new editions of *A Human Document* will also be read in the absence of context or commentary.[22]

In much the same way, then, that Derrida is responsible for disseminating the *paleonyms* he prints under erasure, Phillips is responsible for disseminating Mallock. This means that it is possible to ask, for example, whether *A Humument* is racist (in the

---

[22] Perhaps some readers will even find Mallock convincing. Contrary to the impression left by Phillips and much of the critical discourse surrounding *A Humument*, I find neither that *A Human Document*'s narrative is so dated as to be beyond all affective engagement, nor that its bias is so transparent as to render its worldview utterly ridiculous.

manner, if not to the extent, that *A Human Document* is racist), and, I believe, that it is

appropriate to pursue such questions if and when the book is understood as constituting a

concrete threat.[23] As the historical charges of obscenity against Burroughs's *Naked*

Lunch, a book appropriated from scattered notes its putative author "ha[d] no precise

memory of writing" (Burroughs, Introduction xxxvii), should remind us, a creator's

methodological rejection of authorial control by no means shields a literary object from

becoming the target of censorship. As much as appropriation-based, interventionist

methods such as erasure and the cut-up activate deeply critical reflections on the material

they treat, they are also responsible for preserving the experiential force and concrete

effects of an underlying source text that always risks taking over the frame.

* **

Despite these points, I am less interested in interrogating *A Humument*'s politics

than I am in exploring how Phillips's responsibility and risk contribute to his unique

---

[23] This is, of course, not to suggest that *A Humument*'s racism (to whatever extent and in whatever manner it exists) does constitute a material threat to anyone, and it is hard for me to believe that it ever will. However, the fact that Phillips's work will likely never be seen as dangerous enough to warrant actual censorship does not mean that it is apolitical or that its politics are purely benign. Rather, I propose to treat *A Humument* as a kind of test case for methodologically analogous works whose politics may in fact represent cause for genuine concern. In general, such cases are not unheard of, and several—especially Kenneth Goldsmith's appropriation of Michael Brown's autopsy report in a work called "Michael Brown's body" and Vanessa Place's durational retweeting of racist passages from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*—have become prominent targets of criticism in recent years.

method of literary production, as well their broader implications for contemporary erasure-based writing practices. Overall, my analysis suggests that *A Humument* calls for alternatives to binary models that treat an appropriation's essential impact either as an indistinguishable reassertion of its source or as a way of ironically or critically one-upping it. Beyond *A Humument* and other literary erasures, such models are frequently employed by both critics and supporters of Derrida's philosophy, and even his writing under erasure specifically, despite the significant complications introduced by the dynamics of reading erased words, the logic of the *paleonym*, and Derrida's personal, professional, and intellectual respect for philosophical perspectives (especially Husserl's) that appear to diverge substantially from his own. To counter these binary models, however, it is not sufficient to assert that erasure's supplementary dimension is simply situated between identity and difference, since the location of a space between them cannot be fixed. Rather, I argue that erasure, for both Derrida and Phillips, double/crosses so-called secondary texts' extensions of, and divergences from, their sources.

With Phillips's description of his project as "a curious unwitting collaboration between two ill-suited people seventy-five years apart" ("Notes," second revised ed.) in mind, I propose to call the method demonstrated by Derrida's and Phillips's erasure practices *asymmetrical collaboration*. This method is defined by its twin demonstrations that, first, meaning in a literary or philosophical work is not attributable to a unified authorial intention, and, second, that different actors contribute unequally or asymmetrically to meaning across various dimensions of its structure and significance. The way in which actors' contributions are privileged or not, however, and even the

specific actors and dimensions actually invoked in different interpretations, need not be consistent between works or within a work. For example, the question of chronological priority or origination—in other words, of whether Mallock's or Phillips's text is the first or "primary text"—can be mapped in several ways. Although Mallock's text is obviously the earlier according to standard historical chronology, Partington's comment that it is now a secondary text (Smyth et al. 114) is more than a technical classification. Rather, Partington shows that *A Human Document*, although it was written first, is most likely read second by the majority of contemporary readers, who thus reprioritize the two texts within their own micro-chronologies of reading. This situation illustrates Derrida's elaboration of the general doubleness of origins extremely clearly, since it demonstrates that the temporal priority of source and supplement is reversible, but without for that reason being reducible to the equality of pure presence or singular "Being." In other words, the orientation of asymmetry is not fixed, even as asymmetry saturates any question of origination.

Although the popularity and critical success of *A Humument* illustrates it on a large scale, this doubleness is also embedded in the material instantiation of erasure itself. By transforming the surface of the page into a palimpsest, erasure motivates the crossing, in opposite directions, of two trajectories of meaning-making. On one hand, the presence of words beneath erasing marks, which is a condition for those marks being legible as erasure at all, indicates the historical priority of an original text written by an original author. On the other hand, the visual and material configuration of erasure makes it impossible for readers to interpret this original text prior to its contamination by the new

or supplementary text. Even in erasures in which the source text's coherence is not literally suppressed or obscured, as it usually is in *A Humument*, the fact that it is visually apprehended under erasure conveys in advance that it is extraneous to the text at hand. Thus, the reader's process of activating an erasure's meaning proceeds in the inverse direction of its writers', and from a different centre or origin.[24]

The asymmetry of asymmetrical collaboration does not only apply to chronological dimensions of meaning-making, and several of the applications of erasure employed by *A Humument* create analogously reversible asymmetries in other dimensions. Pages such as 105 (fig. 1, above), 221, and 249 (discussed above) feature spatialities in which hierarchical depth relations are apparent—that is, in which it is clear that some elements of the page or picture are nearer and others are farther away—but may be interpreted differently based on the reader's interpretive reference point (e.g., whether they understand the page's background to be the physical paper and print of Mallock's novel or the background of the scene represented in Phillips's illusionistic space). Pages such as 46 (fig. 3, above) and 79 (discussed above) demonstrate reversible trajectories through the kinds of sensual and intellectual apprehension involved in the

---

[24] In the case of *A Humument*, the fact that Phillips has produced and published multiple versions of each page through multiple editions of the book further pluralizes the work's chronologies. In addition to reading backward or forward in time between *A Human Document* and *A Humument*, for example, readers can also read backward and forward between editions or between versions of each page, treating Phillips's later pages as erasures of their predecessors. Like many of *A Humument*'s reading experiences, the results of this kind of reading vary. Between editions, readers will find entirely reimagined pages, pages that have been slightly altered but maintain some words and themes from earlier versions, pages that have been added to over time without elements being removed (most notably page 132), and even pages that, having been replaced in intermediary editions, were restored to their earlier versions in more recent editions. To add still more complexity, one can invoke similarly plural chronologies in the reading of different elements from the same page. Phillips has written that he consistently decided on the text of a page before composing its visual elements ("Treated" 182), but readers, of course, are under no compulsion to interpret a page's images as derivative or secondary to its textual selections.

interpretation of their language (e.g., between the sounds of speech and their meaning as words). Common to all of these dimensions is the persistence of asymmetry. In every case reading, or the activation of meaning, can take place only when elements are ordered in a linear sequence indicating an interpretive trajectory, even if the exact order the reader chooses is variable and open to subsequent revision.

Perhaps most significantly, *A Humument*'s staging of asymmetry in these dimensions parallels the asymmetry of power or authority inescapably suggested by erasure's function as correction or censorship. This image of erasure, well-known both to scholars who work with archival manuscripts and to students of the history of censorship, reimagines the chronological doubleness of origins in appropriation-based writing as a crisis of political influence—the authority to establish a definitive or legally sanctioned text. To a greater degree than other appropriation-based literary forms, erasure makes a claim on authority, indicating that a certain reading trajectory should be privileged against other readings. At the same time, the material circumstances of erasure's legibility as erasure undermine the stability of this claim, since the marks that perform erasure also indicate the possibility of an alternative reading (whether or not it is readily accessible). Phillips's page 44 (fig. 5) illustrates many possible manifestations of this power struggle; all of them, however, share a resistance to collapsing authority entirely, which would also mean recognizing all possible trajectories as equally influential. Alongside other techniques used throughout *A Humument*, page 44 includes a large *X* drawn by Phillips's "rivers"—contiguous lines composed of blank spaces from Mallock's original novel ("Notes," second revised ed.)—below large painted letters spelling "WAS HER," and

covers the majority of Mallock's text with a pattern depicting a brick wall. Overall, the composition invites several interpretations of both Phillips's process and erasure's broader implications for authority. At first, interpreting Phillips's painted letters as spelling part of "was here," as well as recognizing the transformation of Mallock's words into an inert, structural material (brick), suggests Phillips's identification with the power dynamics of urban graffiti art. In this model, Phillips's act of erasure overwrites a defunct or illegitimate (and hence non-signifying, in the sense that a brick wall is non-signifying in relation to a page from a book) power structure in order to reclaim its territory in the name of a new regime—presumably Phillips's. However, the fact that we find only an *X* where we would expect a signature or tag complicates the nature of the takeover. For example, the signatory's self-negation may indicate that he does not intend to wrest control of the page, but is instead satisfied with annihilating its signifying capabilities, in this sense suggesting that the question of authority does not concern relations within the space of the page, but between the page and what lies outside it. "Was here," in other words, should be understood firmly in the past tense, representing the belatedness of the novel as a locus of power in general; in the present, power lies elsewhere.
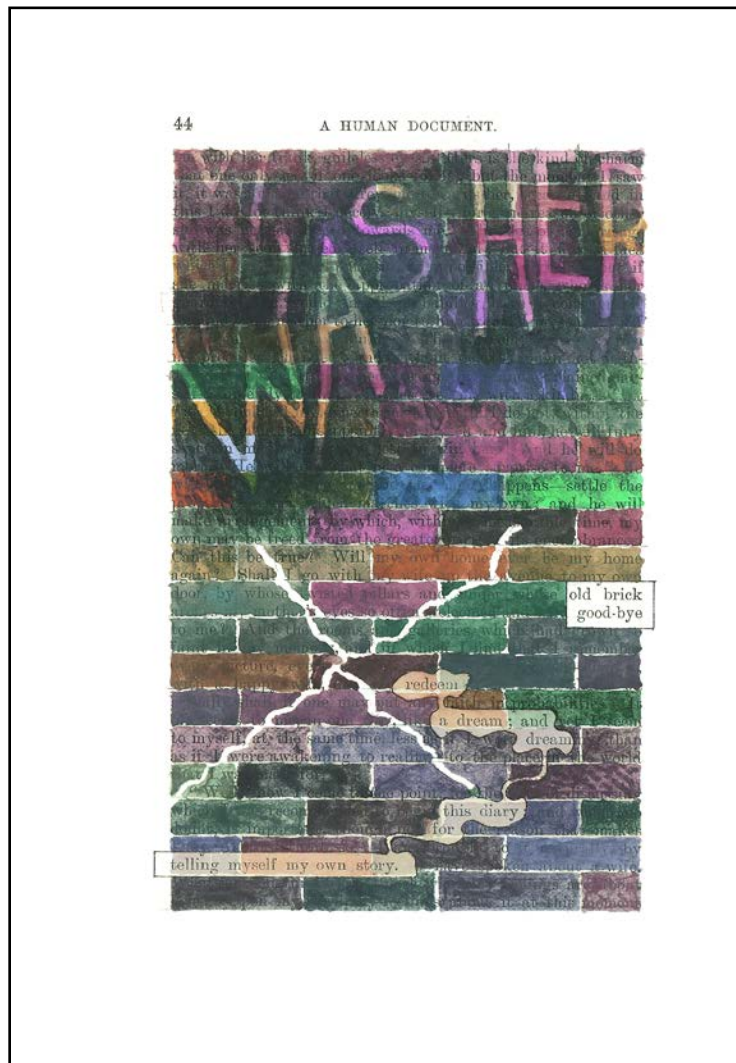
Fig. 5: Phillips, Tom. *A Humument Page 44* **(second version 1986).** © Tom Phillips,

DACS / SODRAC (2018)

Another interpretation of the message's tense, however, could motivate an entirely

different way of interpreting the struggle for authority over the page's meaning. This is

especially relevant in concert with the observation that the blank spaces constituting the

page's *X* are endemic to Mallock's text, making them, in a sense, Mallock's, not

Phillips's. Rather than seeing erasure as a form of overwriting or usurpation, one is in turn directed to the understanding of erasure conveyed by, for example, an author's self-corrected draft manuscript, in which erasure signifies a superior realization of an underlying authorial intention. That the *X* on page 44 is already, in a sense, part of Mallock's text would then suggest that the motivation and form of Phillips's erasures are rooted in Mallock's own, original intention. Phillips thus opens *A Humument* to McHale's interpretation of erasure poetry as an archaeological form, focused more on the continual (though perhaps futile) recovery of origins than on burying, masking, or covering up ("Archaeologies"). Considering erasure in this vein, we might suggest that it was Mallock, not Phillips, who "was here" on page 44 all along, and whose original authorship dictates the definitive reading of *A Humument*.

On a broader level, however, this interrogation of *A Humument*'s authorship is only one of the many double/crossed trajectories that intersect with Phillips's "rivers," which Phillips uses throughout the book to connect his islands of selected text and occasionally to construct figures or symbols (as on page 44). While most commentators mention *A Humument*'s "rivers"—indeed, they are among the most unique and visible results of the book's signature combination of textual erasure and visual artwork—few analyze them comprehensively, perhaps because they provide one of the most resilient sites of undecidability in Phillips's compositional method. In the first place, both the material source of Phillips's "rivers" in *A Human Document* (i.e., the blank spaces left between printed words in Mallock's text) and the form they take in *A Humument* function to "condition [the formulations of the text] through blanks and negations" in the manner

Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser ascribe to textual "negativity" (xii). Because this conditioning takes place at the margins of the text's manifest content, negativity represents a "tacit dimension" or "latent double" (Budick and Iser xii) that inherently destabilizes authorial control over any text's meaning, instead exposing it to a conventional yet unpredictable set of interactions between writer, reader, and text (Iser 329). What is remarkable about *A Humument*, however, is that Phillips's "rivers" double (or double-cross) the production of meaning yet again, since the blanks used to construct them remain operative in both Mallock's and Phillips's narratives, conditioning each differently. This doubled doubling or pluralization of negativity thus refracts Budick and Iser's problematization of authorial control through Phillips's uniquely additional disruption of conventional reading, producing an even more intense interpretive instability.

By using Mallock's blank spaces to create his own text's blank spaces, Phillips becomes both a reader of Mallock's text and a writer—or, more specifically, a rewriter of Mallock. In both her essay on Mac Low and her remarkably similar essay on Phillips, Pfahl explores how the authors' processes of transforming creative reading methods into original publications both posit and undermine the possibility of producing a text entirely free of authorial control. However, while it seems that Mac Low's chance-based erasures genuinely sought to achieve a "power-free" text (and, according to Pfhal's evaluation, failed to do so ["Reading"]), Pfahl's argument that Phillips's text intended to do the same thing ("After") rests on shakier ground. In fact, Phillips's compositional methods indicate that, rather than conflating his double/crossed position as reader-author with a general

flattening of authority, he sought to further nuance and complicate the forces pulling him toward each pole of the divide. Unlike Mac Low's, Phillips's treatment of his source text reflects an obvious degree of authorial control, primarily through its highly stylized and selective use of language to maintain narrative consistency. Far from placing his process on par with that of any standard reader, Phillips proudly depicts himself, in a figure that also exemplifies the asymmetry of his collaboration with Mallock, as a poet standing on Mallock's shoulders ("Notes," second revised ed.). Moreover, Phillips's use of his "rivers" as negative space within his own narrative exceeds Mallock's comparatively standard spacing in its capacity to open up interpretive possibilities, since Phillips's more fragmented text frequently forces readers to interpolate punctuation and accentuation that is neither literally presented nor implied by conventional textual spacing.

All of this suggests that Phillips's use of negativity in his "rivers," far from resolving the problem of authorial power, functions to exacerbate the problem along multiple possible trajectories of interpretation. Because *A Humument*'s "rivers" invoke negativity at multiple levels of their constitution, they seem never to render themselves available for a fixed interpretation that would encompass them as a bounded category. On the other hand, they remain readily accessible to linear interpretation and reinterpretation, since they are inseparable from the active experiences of reading and viewing almost everywhere in the book. These characteristics are consistent with Iser's theory of textual play, in which negativity acts as "an enabling structure" (336) for meaning-making processes that are always actively "mov[ing] toward a final result" (327), even if this result may be different every time the text is activated. The name Phillips gives his

"rivers," then, is remarkably apt, since it is as if the reader travels or crosses them on the way from one semantic position to another, but never encounters them as originary or fixed forms. They act as key conduits of *A Humument*'s asymmetry, but without providing a ground from which the interpretive trajectories they facilitate can be stably evaluated. Yet Phillips's "rivers" are also more than Iser's negativity in a rather literal sense, since they in fact encompass two distinct and negatively related activations of negativity (i.e., Mallock's original blank spaces and Phillips's reconstituted ones). Without altering the essential nature of negativity's operation, they thus elaborate or thicken the "playground" (Iser 329) of interpretive trajectories *A Humument* makes available, lengthening the routes between various nodes of its hermeneutic network and pluralizing the opportunities for these trajectories to turn back on themselves or intersect. Phillips's "rivers," in other words, are always flowing, but they also have substantial width and weight.

Arguably, the thickening effect of reading and reading through Phillips's "rivers" is personified by the figure of Bill Toge. As a major protagonist in *A Humument* who is nonetheless absent from *A Human Document*, Toge stands out as a kind of excess narrative element, paradoxically added to the book as a result of Phillips's subtractive method of composition. Aside from the fact that depictions of Toge—usually as a pink shape variably resembling a human figure, an amoeba, and a land mass—are consistently composed using the blank spaces or "rivers" in Mallock's text, commentators often note

that his name must be culled from the word "together" or "altogether,"[25] demonstrating

the impossibility (within *A Humument*'s textual constraints) of bringing Toge into a state

of full communion or togetherness with himself or his love interests. It is similarly

difficult, due to the incredibly fragmented nature of *A Humument*'s narrative, to

conceptualize Toge as a complete and distinct character in the story. Commentators have

posed various solutions to this problem: while Wagner-Lawlor sees Toge as Phillips's

"alter ego," helping Phillips to recognize his authorial location "at a site between

imagination and reality," James L. Maynard understands Toge as a "relative subject" (91)

acting primarily as a site of identification for the reader, who uses this identification to

extract a unified reading experience from the book's discontinuities (92). In addition, I

argue that commentators have understated the extent to which Toge is also a kind of

shadow or reincarnation of Grenville, the hero of Mallock's story. That Toge shares

Grenville's love for Irma and is often found in the same scenes and situations featured in

Grenville's narrative makes it difficult to distinguish between the two characters when

Phillips's and Mallock's books are read in tandem.

       Overall, it might be best to accept Maynard's rather broad statement that "Toge

---

[25] Although almost all commentators repeat the truism that "[Toge's] adventures can only (and must) occur on pages which originally contained the words 'together' or 'altogether' (the only words from which his name can be extracted)," as Phillips puts it in his "Notes" through *A Humument*'s fourth edition, Craig Dworkin makes a point of refuting this narrative, listing several other words from which Toge's name could be culled (*Reading* 134). Dworkin also notes that "on at least one occasion Phillips forms the name from two adjacent lines," probably referring to page 231 (*Reading* 134). Cutting through these trivialities, however, Strizever develops a productive critical observation out of the discrepancy between the actual text of *A Humument* and Phillips's narrativization of his own process. Strizever suggests that Phillips's "rule," regardless of its accuracy, has become canonical due to its continued citation and repetition. Therefore, she states, "[i]t is not possible to separate the book from its production narrative. If the altered book is already a palimpsest in which the original book is partially seen through the new work, *A Humument* is perhaps a meta-palimpsest: the new work, formed out of *A Human Document*, is always partially obscured by the narrative of its creation" (Strizever 110).

encompasses all the tensions within and between the forms of media present in [*A Humument*]" (91) while rejecting his contention that this makes Toge primarily a conduit for the reader's relationship with the book object. Rather, the excessive presence of Toge gives substance to any and all forms of mediation that can be staged within the book, including mediations whose trajectories are mutually exclusive. This means that Toge, in addition to thematizing the relationship between *A Humument*'s reader and its material text, should also be seen as foregrounding the asymmetrical structures of intention and authority undergirded by the figures of Phillips and Mallock as authors.

Alongside the many crossovers between Toge's and Phillips's subjectivities discussed at length by Wagner-Lawlor, Toge's foregrounding of *A Humument*'s authorship comes through strongly when comparing different editions' versions of *A Humument*'s page 6. The second revised and fourth editions' page (fig. 6) features an image of Toge with text suggesting the imbrication, described by Maynard, of his subjectivity with *A Humument*'s materiality: the fragment "pieces of / writings of the / the [sic] writings of / the names" indicates the dependence of Toge's subjectivity (and, literally, his name) on *A Humument*'s fragmented writing, while the phrase "journal / contents / as yet / is only one half of the / toge / story" emphasizes the need to extend the materiality of *A Humument*'s writing into the subjective domain of character. Yet the version of this page included in the fifth and final (sixth) editions (fig. 7), although it retains many of the same selections from Mallock's text, appears to transform the figure of Toge into that of Mallock. Indeed, Phillips's notes to these editions (but not earlier ones) mention that Toge's first name, Bill, is meant to establish him as an "alter ego" to

(William Hurrell) Mallock ("Notes," fifth ed.; "Notes," final ed.). Now, set beside a subtly cut up and collaged photograph of a moustached man who appears to be from Mallock's era,[26] the text of page 6 is adapted to describe a real author: "the / most literal / man / alone," "The Journal / man of / the / novel / volume," and "the / cover / man[;] / he had / compiled / the story." On this page, then, Phillips's debt to Mallock's authorial subjectivity is both acknowledged and undermined, since the page's captions also re-entrench Mallock in the objective materiality of his appearance within the book; for example, he is described as "[t]he / man as / photograph" (which recycles phrasing from the second revised edition's version of the page) and, slyly, "man / she had / conceived / with / rough / materials." By using the same page, and sometimes the same text, across editions to describe both Toge and Mallock as mixed figures of subjectivity and materiality, Phillips asserts continuity between Toge's status as a "relative subject" (Maynard 91) and Mallock's, since the latter is ambivalently constituted by the actualization of his authorial intention in *A Human Document* and the malleable, incomplete remnants of his material life.

---

[26] I am unable to confirm whether it is in fact Mallock who is depicted in the photograph.
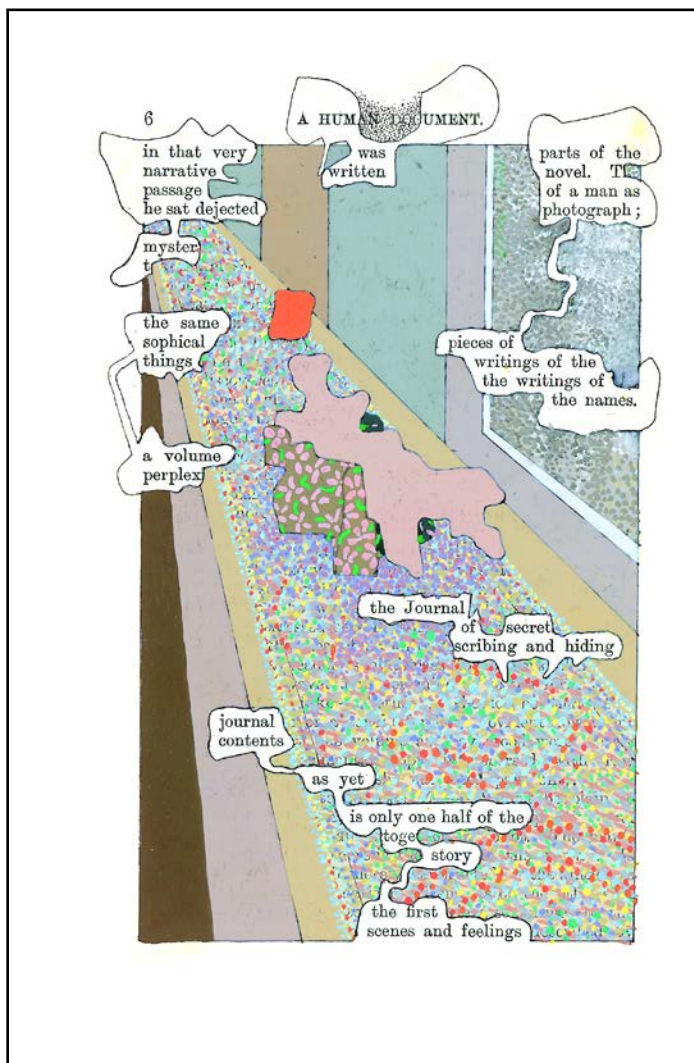
Fig. 6: Phillips, Tom. *A Humument Page 6* **(first version 1973).** © Tom Phillips, DACS
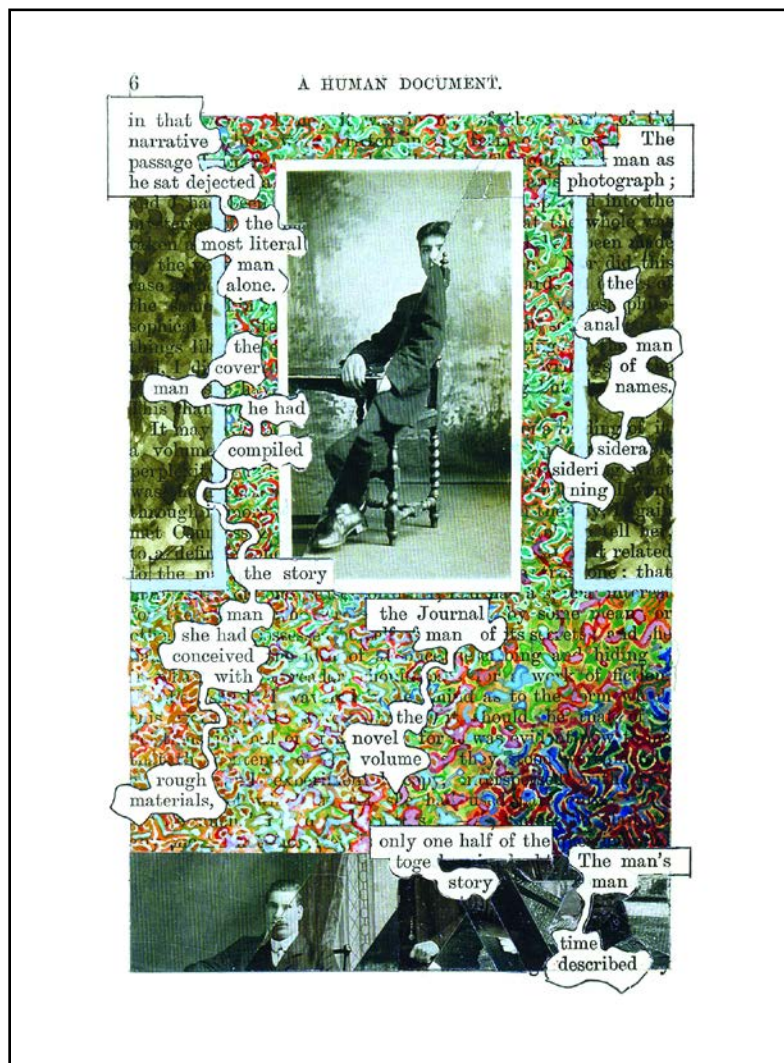
/ SODRAC (2018)

Fig. 7: Phillips, Tom. *A Humument Page 6* **(second version 2008).** © Tom Phillips,

DACS / SODRAC (2018)

Finally, the fifth and final (sixth) editions' recycling of the phrase "only one half of the / toge / story" from the second revised and fourth editions' version of page 6 clinches the recurring asymmetry of textual authority in *A Humument*. Between both versions of the page, we are told that (1) "journal contents" and (2) Mallock himself each

constitute only one half of the story, but these two halves, of course, do not make a whole. Many elements from various and often incompatible literary dimensions— Phillips's authorial contribution, Mallock's original narrative, the story's (or stories') characters, the imagined scrapbook presented as *A Human Document*'s source, etc.—are obvious contributors to the experience of the book object called *A Humument*. At the same time, however, the pages' assertions that each component acts as half the overall story seem uncannily logical. Toge's subjectivity, in the earlier version of the page, would be the other half of his material composition out of "journal contents," while Mallock's contribution of half the story's authorship would find its partner in Phillips's. The proliferation of these double/crossings, identifiable less by their persistent incompleteness than by their indication of different kinds of wholes, constitutes a form of underdetermination[27] in which *A Humument* is neither a fulfilled presence nor the absent centre of a multiplicity. Neither objectively complete nor formally incomplete, the book is a plurality of crossed trajectories on the way to completion by various means.

* * *

---

[27] My use of the word "underdetermination" here is indebted to Jerome McGann's *The Textual Condition*. In that book's introduction, McGann suggests that "texts themselves (so-called) can always be shown to have been underdetermined with respect to their possible meanings. This happens because language can only exist in a textual condition of some sort, and because that condition—the embodiment of language— releases the Idea of Language (which is an imagination of codes and rules) into a more or less Chaotic Order" (10). See my introduction for further discussion of McGann.

While the notion of asymmetrical collaboration clearly distinguishes erasure from the Romantic ideal of unified authorship and intention, it also indicates Phillips's divergence from what I call *symmetrical collaboration*, which is represented by Cage's and Mac Low's proto-erasures as well as Burroughs's early experiments with the cut-up. In works like Cage's "Empty Words," symmetrical collaboration manifests as the simultaneous and non-hierarchical voicing of multiple independent aspects of language. Here, meaning develops (ideally) from the total assemblage of words, letters, sounds, and sense experiences, as well as the fundamentally incommensurable contributions of Thoreau, Cage, chance procedures drawn from the *I Ching*, and the specific situation of each of the work's readers and readings. Cage's efforts to eliminate distinctions between the objective and subjective contributors to a work's meaning are relatively extreme. Nonetheless, the majority of postmodernist approaches to collaboration reinforce one of Cage's fundamental aims: to disrupt the apparent stability and authority of an artwork's supposedly correct interpretation by replacing the figure of the single author with multiple, equally empowered participants in the creative process. This framework is iterated succinctly by Burroughs and Gysin's understanding of their collaborative process in *The Third Mind*, in which, they believe, their identities are collapsed into an emergent "third mind" that is not so much a new locus of authority as a hypothetical indication of the book's "absent" centre (Lemaire). As Gérard-Georges Lemaire explains in his introductory contribution to the book, *The Third Mind*

> is not the history of a literary collaboration but rather the complete fusion
> in a praxis of two subjectivities, two subjectivities that metamorphose into

a third; it is from this collusion that a new author emerges, an absent third person, invisible and beyond grasp, decoding the silence.

The book is therefore the negation of the omnipresent and all-powerful author […]. (18)

Whatever kinds of individuals they include in the process of collaboration, Cage's and Burroughs and Gysin's methods are united in their insistence that equalizing these individuals' contributions coincides with the undermining and destruction of authorial unity and, on a broader level, authority. I have argued, however, that this strategy parallels the self-defeating logic of Deleuze and Guattari's radicale-system, along with demonstrating why methods like the cut-up prompt Deleuze and Guattari to distinguish radicale-systems from rhizomatic multiplicities in the first place (*Thousand* 6). For Cage, Mac Low, and (to a lesser extent) Burroughs and Gysin, asserting the radical equality of actors through an absolute lack of foundational ordering criteria fundamentally compromises any critique of the "arborescent" model of authorship, since, in the course of their creative processes, lack itself becomes an originary condition that must be enforced at the root of its dispersed offspring. In seeking to supplant the descriptive function of language with its performative function, the authors are nonetheless forced to describe their performances; as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "[t]he world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world" (*Thousand* 6).

But if, "[i]n truth, it is not enough to say, 'Long live the multiple'" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 6), what should be done instead? Deleuze and Guattari write,

The multiple *must be made*, not by always adding a higher dimension, but

rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety, with the number of

dimensions one already has available—always $n-1$ (the only way the one

belongs to the multiple: always subtracted). Subtract the unique from the

multiplicity to be constituted; write at $n-1$ dimensions. (*Thousand* 6)

Since these descriptions are both notably enigmatic and rarely repeated or summarized,

any interpretation of them can only be speculative. Nonetheless, it is difficult not to see

resonances between Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of subtraction and the

techniques of erasure writing, especially defined through Phillips's method of selective

extraction from a pre-existing whole. Both methods hold that linear, even arborescent,

trajectories of interpretation—such as those that follow intention, authorial meaning, or

the singular dimension of the subject—are not structurally absent from multiplicity, since

such an absence would only constitute the principle of that absence as an "angelic and

superior unity" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 6). Indeed, the formula $n-1$ suggests

that neither unity (e.g., the unity of the one) nor superiority (e.g., the privilege

provisionally accorded to the "unique" subject who subtracts herself from multiplicity) is

by itself poisonous to the rhizome; only their unshakeable combination is poisonous. As

long as these parallel lines of total arborescence are set askew—and eventually made to

cross, cross out, and double back—rhizomatic connections are well prepared to flourish.

Moreover, this flourishing by no means requires the prohibition of further outgrowths of

arborescence. All that is necessary is for future taproots to manifest as revisable and as

revisions, always at risk of slipping into multiplicity again.

In the method of erasure writing pioneered by Phillips, neither arborescent

structures of authorship nor rhizomatic excesses of materiality are excluded. Rather,

Phillips inscribes these and other dimensions of the text within and against each other in a

plurality of asymmetrical trajectories. Alongside Phillips's many enigmatic descriptions

of the distinctly unequal relationship between himself and Mallock as co-authors of the

book, this asymmetry is at work in Phillips's statement that "[a]t its lowest [*A Humument*]

is a reasonable example of *bricolage*, and at its highest it is perhaps a massive

déconstruction job" ("Notes," second revised ed.). Referring to Lévi-Strauss's and

Derrida's leading concepts in structuralist and poststructuralist critical theory,

respectively, Phillips plays on the fact that the two movements are less adversarial blocs

than distinct strands of production fraught with both continuity and contradiction.[28] The

point, however, is not to contain *A Humument* within a grand scheme of

post/structuralism any more than one of arborescence and rhizomaticity, since any

analogies between the many dualities invoked by *A Humument* are limited and only

provisionally useful. For Deleuze and Guattari, too, the goal is not to funnel interpretation

into a particular model (dualistic or otherwise), but to "employ a dualism of models only

in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models" (*Thousand* 20). This is to say

that even *A Thousand Plateaus* cannot finally model reality through what would

henceforth act as the "angelic and superior unity" of rhizomaticity itself (Deleuze and

Guattari, *Thousand* 6). In order to truly "make the multiple" (Deleuze and Guattari,

Thousand 6), the book—indeed, any book—must act not as a model but instead as "a

---

[28] Catherine Malabou, expanding on this relationship in "Following Generation," suggests that
structuralism and poststructuralism represent a "reversibility" (31) analogous to the reversibility of
signified and signifier explicated by Derrida (29).

little machine," plugging into particular rhizomatic lines but never tracing a blueprint for the whole system (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 4).

Very much in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome-book, Phillips suggests that "*A Humument* exemplifies the need to 'do' structuralism, and, (as there are books both *of* and *on* philosophy) to be *of* it rather than *on* it" ("Notes," second revised ed.). In doing so, he also places *A Humument* in the tradition of experimental literary and textual praxis that threads together Cage and Mac Low's chance operations, Burroughs's explorations of the cut-up, and even Marion's negative theology. However, Phillips's combination of experimental technique with an enduring recognition, preservation, and reproduction of authorial intention and creative genius reveals a rarely acknowledged truth: that experimental praxis, especially when it centres appropriation and critical recontextualization, is in an important sense culturally conservative. While theorists of poststructuralism and the literary avant-garde alike have tended to maintain that radical methodology guarantees radical politics, attending to the content of appropriated texts—even when that content is presented, figuratively or literally, under erasure—demonstrates that the concrete impact of these texts is inherently subject to the structure of the double/cross. In short, they are subject to multiple, asymmetrical, and sometimes directly opposed interpretive trajectories whose manifestation in a particular cultural moment cannot be pre-determined. While this may be true of all material texts according to what Jerome McGann calls the "textual condition" (3), it is especially unavoidable in works that highlight the materiality of their uptake and erasure of appropriated texts, since these works literally inscribe inverse trajectories of meaning within the textual artifacts they re-

present to their reader. Because of the inherent risk that either of two trajectories may be treated as predominant—for example, that a *paleonym* may come to be understood as an author's only noted contribution to discourse, or that a secondary text may be read as a primary text and vice versa—the palimpsestic thickness of these texts cannot be reduced to a single argumentative position. Nor can it be reduced to the fragmentation and dispersion of positions in general, since such a gesture, as Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate in their critique of radicale-systems, merely defers unity to a newly predominant principle of difference.

This means that the analysis of erasure poetry must abandon two of the best and most frequently regarded theoretical models of the avant-garde's assault on arborescent culture. These are, first, the vulgar Hegelian and Marxist model of a symmetrical contradiction or resistance, and second, the vulgar Deleuzianism that "breaks on through (to the other side)," as Gordon C. F. Bearn puts it (453), which must ground the absolute affirmation of difference within the singular negation of contiguity. Yet finding new models to account for the conservatism of writing under erasure does not need to undermine the progressive political capacities of texts such as Phillips's *A Humument*. Instead, reframing their capacities within the thickness of these texts' networks of interpretive trajectories can more thoroughly activate the richness of literary experience for various political and cultural ends. An example of this activation is Tammy Lai-Ming Ho's "Book-eating Book," one of the few commentaries that reads *A Humument* as an engagement with Victorian cultural and political formations rather than merely a chance encounter with a Victorian artifact. In doing so, Ho invokes the capacity for preservation

and reproduction inherent to Phillips's method as part of a nuanced and multilayered understanding of the book's historical positioning. Further, Ho proposes this nuance with imagination and theoretical daring, arguing that *A Humument* represents an "interplay between aggression, ambivalence, and communion" comparable to the ethically complex relationship between the eating body and what it consumes (293).

In a very different and far more abstract direction, one may turn to Gaston Bachelard's early works on the philosophy of science in order to resituate erasure—which takes shape, for Bachelard, rather straightforwardly, as the correction of errors—at the heart of intellectual development in general. Much like the contradictions of Hegelianism and Marxism, vulgar Deleuzianism's dynamic of inside and outside, and even the "dualism of models" employed by Deleuze and Guattari (*Thousand* 20), Bachelard views the development of knowledge as an interaction between dualistic oppositions; as he writes in *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, "[i]t is by no means enough for people to be right: they have to be right *against* someone else" (242). This quip summarizes Bachelard's belief, outlined more fully in texts such as *The Dialectic of Duration*, that reality is structured around "rhythms" of otherwise logically inconsistent types. Unlike the more vulgar varieties of Hegelian dialectics and Deleuzianism, however, Bachleard's "rhythmanalysis" does not continually exert itself toward new extremes of being, but instead fills out or thickens the territories of mediation and contiguity between, for example, subjective intuition and objective fact. To advance scientific knowledge is not to push beyond the objects currently constituted within it, but to reinforce the "*realism* of measurement" over the "*reality* of the object" (*Formation* 213) by quantitatively

bolstering the precision of measurements and, consequently, the ability to activate them for increasingly specialized purposes. Thus, "the scientific mind […] constitutes itself as rectified errors" in a very literal sense (*Formation* 237), in that it is an inherently instrumentalized and socialized accumulation of assertions and refutations oriented toward increasing precision (*Formation* 239).

Considering Mary McAllester Jones's careful argument for the contiguity of Bachelard's scientific and literary philosophies, I argue that it is more than possible to extend his theory of the scientific mind to literature. At the very least, such an extension should be readily applicable to erasure poetry, in which literature's more imaginative capacities are literally inscribed within acts that signify correction and critique. To claim that *A Humument* "constitutes itself as rectified errors" indeed emphasizes the book's conservatism insofar as it foregrounds its preservation of Mallock's original authorial trajectories, whether or not they are crossed, crossed out, or inverted. Such a claim also implicitly problematizes the radical (though ultimately unsuccessful, in that it exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's radicale-system) argument that erasure poetry, since it deeply fragments the unity of authorial intention, undoes linearity and authority altogether. However, just as Bachelard's instrumentalized scientific knowledge remains available for a variety of functional applications, erasure poetry's limitations do not stifle its ability to constitute a plurality of political alternatives. To the contrary, erasure's inability to represent a definitive position "on" politics is precisely what allows it to be political. In other words, it is erasure's asymmetrical conjunction of arborescent and rhizomatic lines that guarantees its capacity to evoke genuine transformation—even if defining such a

transformation remains, for criticism, an interminable task.

Chapter 5

Crossings: Contemporary Erasure Poetries

Over the last ten years, champions of the experimental literary movement known as Conceptual writing have dominated the call to recognize appropriation-based works as keystones of the contemporary literary tradition. Basing their conclusions largely on Conceptualist projects from the late 1990s and early 2000s, seminal works in the theorization and criticism of Conceptual writing—especially Marjorie Perloff's 2010 *Unoriginal Genius*, Kenneth Goldsmith's 2011 *Uncreative Writing*, and Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin's 2011 *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*—have crystallized the movement's argument for appropriation's legitimacy through a particular view of language, literature, and ideology. According to these theorists, the value of appropriation-based works stems from their aesthetically and politically radical challenge to a literary tradition of "Romantic" lyricism—in which poetry is "assumed to be self-expression" in one's own words (Perloff, "Towards")—and the corresponding cultural ideology of creative individualism culminating in the legal defence of copyright.[1] Appropriation, it is argued, dismantles these systems by eschewing subjective authorial

---

[1] Stephen Voyce's "Toward an Open Source Poetics: Appropriation, Collaboration, and the Commons" offers a thorough and persuasive account of appropriation-based writing's efforts to combat the expansion of copyright protections since the advent of the internet. According to Voyce, "[a]fter decades of copyright expansion, appropriative art and writing have arguably taken on a more explicitly political dimension: like open source programmers, those poets and artists who make such tactics the hallmark of their creative practice have had to organize activist networks in opposition to intellectual property regimes" ("Toward" 409).

experience in favour of direct engagement with the materiality of texts, evoking a literary framework Goldsmith provocatively refers to as "hyperrealism" (*Uncreative* 83-108). As Dworkin points out, "[t]he very procedures of conceptual writing […] demand an opaquely material language: something to be digitally clicked and cut, physically moved and reframed, searched and sampled, and poured and pasted" ("Fate" xxxvi). However, the belief that appropriation-based literature directly leverages language's materiality into aesthetic and political radicality is perhaps best reflected in Annette Gilbert's introduction to her anthology, *Reprint: Appropriation (&) Literature*. According to Gilbert, appropriation-based works "challenge the concepts of innovation and originality dictated by our culture" ("Book" 49) precisely because they replace speculative interventions into the ideology of authorship (such as Jorge Luis Borges's "The Library of Babel" and "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*") with concrete action. In short, it is appropriation's "introduction into the literary system as real books that really makes the system implode" (Gilbert, "Book" 53).

For their part, readers and practitioners of erasure writing have widely adopted the Conceptualists' argument and confirmed its relevance to their own interests. In his interview with five celebrated erasurists, Andrew David King's question regarding the presence of an "identifiable self" in the authors' works was in all cases met with the claim that the erasure method had partially or entirely eliminated selfhood or "authorial intention" (as M. NourbeSe Philip puts it, herself surrounding the phrase with scare quotes). Indeed, for Brian C. Cooney the "intent" of erasure poetry—which he adapts from Travis Macdonald's "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics"—is so close to that of

Conceptual writing that Goldsmith's *Sports*, which omits none of the text contained in its source document, is in fact a better representation of erasure than the work of "any number of more widely acknowledged 'erasure' poets" (4). Philip's and Cooney's specific aims are vastly different: while Philip seeks to undermine her own voice in order to more fully invoke those of her African ancestors, Cooney favours Goldsmith for his "actually testing the boundaries of intellectual property rights" through his publications' manifestation as real world action (19). Yet both Philip and Cooney, like the many other readers and writers of erasure poetry who echo the comments quoted above, understand the import of erasure through the conditions and effects of its supposed elimination of authorship.

Despite a seemingly broad consensus, Gilbert's pronouncements beg an important question: does the system in fact implode? With reference to the previous chapters of this dissertation, I believe I have shown that, on the whole, it does not. As discussed previously, Courtney Pfahl's critiques of the possibility of a "power-free text" in Jackson Mac Low's and Tom Phillips's works persuasively demonstrate the persistence of systems of authorship within even the most radical examples of literary appropriation. Further, Pfahl extends her conclusions directly to Conceptual writing, stating that in Conceptual works "[t]he author's intention and expression are not sacrificed, but displaced," namely from the product to the process of composition ("Reading" 47).

Beyond these works' maintenance of an "author function"[2] in their social and

---

[2] See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" Here, in response to the debate over authorship inaugurated by Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," Foucault outlines how authorship may be functionally

institutional footprints, however, I have also explored how the use of appropriation cannot be separated from its authors' concrete responsibility for the results of its dissemination. In the case of John Cage and Mac Low's reverence for the combination of appropriation with chance composition, the supposed nonintentionality of their chance-based artworks appears only in conjunction with the obviously intentional arguments of their non-fictional writings; thus, they are responsible for perpetuating a (negative) theological economy of debased theorization and sacred performance that violently excludes certain concrete possibilities. In my discussion of Martin Heidegger's and Jacques Derrida's philosophical erasures in chapters 1 and 2, I demonstrated how erasure highlights its user's responsibility for concretizing systems of transcendental limitation, definition, and exclusion even as it literally takes place (i.e., takes up space and time) "on the way" to a preferred alternative. Finally, my analysis of Phillips's *A Humument* showed that the pluralization of an erasure's aesthetic and political valences takes place only through its simultaneous fidelity to some aspects of the text it takes up, a fidelity for which the erasure's author may always be held accountable. While there is great freedom in erasure's ability to variegate and displace its source text's limitations across multiple communicative dimensions, to argue that this breaks erasure free of its origins ultimately constitutes a new kind of discursive violence—and a restriction of erasure's semantic potential.

    Although most authors, readers, and critics—including those whose practices are

attributed to certain kinds of texts without its being identified with the text's human producer or psychological origin.

centred on appropriation-based works—would likely consider Gilbert's pronouncement an exaggeration, I believe the precise failings of Gilbert's vision of radical literary appropriation have not been sufficiently explored. With a nod to Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, it may be erasure's inability to replicate Gilbert and the Conceptualists' vision of radicality—which, while rooted in the open-mindedness of poststructuralist ideology critique, is also effectively homogenizing and utopian—that has made it accessible to a much wider range of aesthetic, political, and cultural positions.

In the first place, the contemporary erasure tradition largely defined by Ronald Johnson's 1977 *Radi os*, an erasure of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, has established a dominant strain of erasure writing whose relationship with modern literature is substantially different from the antagonism upon which Gilbert grounds her understanding of literary appropriation. For Gilbert, it is pre-eminently important for the category of "appropriation literature" to be restricted to works that appropriate from pre-existing literature, since it is by materializing out of and reinserting themselves into the literary system that appropriation-based works most effectively challenge "the rather slow and traditionalist literary scene" ("Book" 53). Yet erasures in the tradition of Johnson's, while fitting Gilbert's criteria technically, are far from staging the radical assault on literary conventions Gilbert espouses, since they are often at least as invested in a "traditionalist" "focus on content and meaning" as they are in the emphases on "composition and form" Gilbert prefers ("Book" 53). Indeed, what makes these works stand out is that they are both formally innovative and deeply respectful of literary tradition, not only in regard to its cultural and institutional entrenchment, but also with a view to its imaginative and

argumentative nuance.

Perhaps more interesting, however, are the ways erasure poetics have been employed by authors who, while tackling non- or "less" literary texts whose arguments are often unambiguously problematic in a contemporary cultural context, have similarly exploited erasure's ability to foster more conventionally "literary" considerations of the content and meaning of their sources. This is the case both for Philip's *Zong!*, which treats a late-eighteenth-century legal brief as a reservoir of personal histories of the Atlantic slave trade's Middle Passage, and for Jordan Abel's textual assaults on nineteenth-century Western novels and twentieth-century cultural ethnography. These texts are often overshadowed by works of more purely formal experimentation or, perhaps worse, interpreted in relative isolation from the tradition of experimental poetry altogether. Despite these trends, I have foregrounded Philip's and Abel's work in this chapter because of these authors' ability both to conjure more concretely political interventions than those promoted by Gilbert and to affirm erasure poetry's ties to literary authorship. First, Philip and Abel evoke the combined forces of method and content to put literature in direct conversation with a much wider range of texts and, more importantly, the lives and actions those texts influence in lived reality. At the same time, their creative choices draw from both the multidimensionality of literary language and the singularity of individual authorial responsibility to craft semantic trajectories that are neither predicted nor limited by real world politics, setting the two authors on paths that are in some senses poignantly divergent. Without having to claim central or defining influence within the genre of erasure poetry, therefore, they constitute some of the

greatest extensions of erasure's capacity to double/cross.

By elucidating the fundamental distinctions and surprising parallels between the works of Johnson, Philip, Abel, and other contemporary erasure poets, I hope to demonstrate the genre's potential to found a plurality of creative and interpretive trajectories. In other words, the positions set in motion by erasure do not represent a merely dispersed multiplicity, but instead occupy indefinite dimensions of bidirectional extension, reversal, and crossing in which every trajectory is both concretely voiced and held uniquely responsible for the partiality of its manifestation. While Conceptual writing seeks to fold it into the unified front of an avant-garde movement, I argue that erasure, much like writing in the Derridean sense, is better understood as a method or technology. This is to say that erasure's conceptual unity is only as strong as its actual dissemination, and that the use of erasure is path-breaking only insofar as it may always be traversed in at least two directions. Erasure, regardless of the discursive or concrete facts it seeks to return us to, also pluralizes. Finally, it is this pluralization, and not the univocity of a supposed radicalism, that allows erasure to function as a simultaneously aesthetic and political medium of conflict and affiliation.

* * *

In her entry on *Radi os* in *Appropriation (&) Literature*, Gilbert emphasizes how

Johnson's book—whose text is culled entirely from the first four books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, preserving the fragments in their original positions throughout its sparse 91 pages—challenges "a misconceived notion of originality": for her, the book's "visual character" and self-reflexive portrayals of language constitute its key developments in the broader genre of appropriation literature (136). Similarly, Steve McCaffery's "Corrosive Poetics" focuses on the text's compositional method in order to link it to Roland Barthes's "death of the Author," stressing the extent of Johnson's philosophical polemic against originality as such. Both Gilbert and McCaffery, then, seek to situate Johnson's work on a path that is both well-known and well-worn, leading from the "Romantic" artifice of literary originality to a future in which writers or "scriptors" (Barthes 145-47), having abandoned the pretence of individual expression, turn their efforts toward aesthetic actions both more in tune with the global intertext and more radically critical of its homogenized channels.

Yet Gilbert's and McCaffery's emphases on Johnson's methodology suppress *Radi os*'s multidimensionality as a work inviting its own indefinitely variegated interpretations. *Radi os* does not only act out a poststructuralist textuality; it also cultivates an individual style of expression, retells one of Western literature's most enduring stories, and conveys a unique cosmological worldview. In addition to illuminating *Paradise Lost*'s seemingly bottomless well of meaning, *Radi os* extends its own depths, though in a variant direction comprising Johnson's own arcs, contexts, and intertexts. Johnson himself suggests that "people open [*Radi os*] expecting a deconstruction and find an arching continuity" ("Up Till Now"; qtd. in Hair, *Johnson's*

128). But what really matters is that *Radi os* is both, and that its flirtation with the spectre of "deconstruction" via writing under erasure turns back on the structure of Johnson's expression at a plurality of junctures, sending it aslant of Gilbert and McCaffery's pseudo-Barthesian binary. Eric Selinger puts it quite directly, stating that *Radi os* is "a 'work,' in […] Barthes's terms, as well as a 'text'" (48). Rather than an abandonment of expression, voice, and individual responsibility, Johnson's writing thus clears the way for a rich tradition of erasure poetry that fragments and reassembles these elements in view of both literary history and the always unfulfilled possibility of an un-authored, "power-free" text (Pfahl, "Reading").

Although Gilbert quotes from Guy Davenport's praise of "emulation" or "find[ing one's] poetry in another poet" in the latter's afterword to *Radio s*, she neglect's Davenport's subsequent claim that "emulation is one of the most revolutionary forms of originality" (93). What Davenport recognizes, along with the majority of *Radi os*'s readers, is that the simple distinction between original authorship and radical appropriation is insufficient for characterizing the complex relationship between Milton's and Johnson's texts, as well as their voices and identities as authors. Both *Paradise Lost* and *Radi os* are, in both message and method, complex meditations on the nature of created works, and the connections between them only further nuance the models of authorship they establish. These nuances are brought to the fore by critics like Logan Esdale, who depict the play of original authorship within the books' arguments in a way that has little to do with Gilbert's simplistic narrative of appropriation literature as an inherently radical challenge to traditional literature. The Satan of *Paradise Lost*,

according to Esdale, "posit[s] a world of solidarity and original authors," while *Radi os*'s method reinforces Milton's claim that "[w]e are not self-created but we are free" (252); in other words, and somewhat paradoxically, it is Johnson's "obedien[ce]" to Milton's argument, not his revolt against Milton's methods, that grounds his assault on authorial power in general. Of course, Esdale's description of Johnson as an "obedient, anti-Satanic poet" (252) is somewhat overstated; Ross Hair, for instance, has good reason to call Johnson's method "stealth" or "theft" (in contrast with Robert Duncan's "derivative poetics" ["Derivation or Stealth?"]), and it is worth stating that, despite the extent to which Milton himself "found his poem" in the older texts available to him (Davenport 93), his contemporaries likely would not have recognized Johnson as a legitimate successor.[3] These complications, however, are exactly the point of Johnson's treatment, as both his and Milton's texts constitute creative responses to God's law of human freedom, which is itself a sort of paradox: humans are "Authors to themselves in all / Both what they judge and what they choose," yet they are at once bound to their responsibility for this freedom by their creator's "high Decree / Unchangeable, Eternal" (Milton 3.123-27).

The asymmetrical relationships between Johnson's and Milton's works across numerous dimensions of their texts demonstrate that the solution to this riddle is not to be found at the extremes—that is, neither in Satan's wholly original "mind not to be chang'd

---

[3] Both Samuel Barrow and Andrew Marvell, in their verses introducing the 1674 edition of *Paradise Lost*, stress that the poem is an eminently complete text, strongly implying that it could only be damaged by revision or fragmentation. Barrow states, for instance, that the book "contains all things and the origin of all things, and their destinies and final ends" (6), while Marvell writes, almost as a pre-emptive challenge to Johnson, that "no room is here for Writers left, / But to detect their Ignorance or Theft" (8).

by Place or Time" (Milton 1.253) nor in the perfection of a foreknowledge belonging only to God (Milton 3.117-19)—but in a middle territory whose plurality can be pursued indefinitely. One instance of such a pursuit can be traced through Johnson's treatment of parts of the passage quoted above:

On the bare outside of the world,

no bars of Hell, nor

far off Heaven,
And Man there placed,

the sole command,

create

or love
[…]
So were created,
Maker

by absolute

          impulse
          immutably foreseen,

                    change

    Unchangeable (51-52)

Through his selections, Johnson at once reiterates, elaborates, and reverses

Milton's themes. At the most general level, Johnson's passage reflects an idea virtually

identical to Milton's: humans, independent of the strictures of pure good or evil, are

instilled with an inalienable capacity to determine their own fate. However, Johnson's

means of constructing this message out of Milton's text goes well beyond straight

summary, since it also in part distorts or deletes the contextual meaning of Milton's

words. "Maker," for instance, is culled from Milton's reference to God as humanity's

maker, yet for Johnson it stands for humanity's ability to create in turn. While this

understanding of humanity is not foreign to *Paradise Lost*, it emphasizes, at a critical

moment, the profound and troubling similarity between God and humans, which Milton's

text (at least at this point, in which God Himself is speaking) attempts to downplay. The

confusion engendered by this conflation is extended by Johnson's injunctive to "create /

or love," which complicates Milton's insistence on God's "sole command," or the

conventional theological notion that there is only one means of being obedient to God.

By Johnson's reckoning, the substance of Milton's depiction of humanity instead presents

a problem inviting multiple, though incomplete, responses: as created beings that can also

themselves create, humans are left to blend, in varying measures, their love of nature's

forms with their impulse to transform them. On this point Johnson could be said to lead

by example, since the method of selection and recomposition by which *Radi os* is

composed displays one version of this balance in a notably concrete form.[4] Yet Johnson's

exercise of his own creative freedom also represents the point at which he departs most

substantially from Milton's work. In the above passage's deference to "change

Unchangeable," as in the poem's opening ("O tree / into the World, / Man / the chosen /

Rose out of Chaos" [3]), Johnson replaces Milton's praise of God with his own reverence

for a universal force of "change" or "Chaos," along with substituting the triumphant

emergence of humanity for the older author's focus on humanity's fall. As Jena Osman

stresses, the resonances of these substitutions are not meant to be localized to their

specific correlations with Milton's poem, but are instead key indicators of Johnson's shift

from a pragmatic focus on the "concrete formations" of language to the more universal

cosmological ideas that became the central theme of his magnum opus, *ARK* (227). In

these ways, the same gestures that reinforce Milton's theological arguments at some

interpretive levels of *Radi os* at others help Johnson develop his distinctly atheistic

alternative to Milton.

　　　　As I showed in previous chapters, erasure makes it possible to unify and disperse,

hide and reveal, and cancel and transform at different levels of the same gesture,

thickening a text's performance across space and time. Within the critical tradition

surrounding Johnson in particular, Esdale's figure of "intensive reading" is an exemplary

---

[4] Among the aspects of *Radi os* that has made it a classic of erasure poetry is its explicit demonstration of its method on the book's inside cover, which shows the first page of *Paradise Lost* in mostly grey text, with Johnson's selections printed in black.

reference point in tracking these many crossroads: as he astutely points out, "*Radi os* is not a collage of quotation that testifies to extensive reading; instead, it is the result of intensive reading" (253). This depiction is especially apt, first of all, because it explodes the field of distinctions Barthes relies on in his seminal arguments against authorial intention: by successfully contrasting two kinds of reading, Esdale disrupts Barthes's disjunction between author and reader, as well as his association of the latter with intertextual multiplicity (Barthes 148). Beyond the negative aspect of this disruption, however, Esdale's understanding of erasure as "intensive reading" also establishes a series of textual dynamics that can be taken up in drastically different ways within the methodology of erasure, as Johnson's emulators have discovered over the last several decades. Hair extrapolates two conclusions from Esdale's reading: first, that *Radi os* "does not encourage the reader to visit the library or follow a trail of references"; second, that Johnson's work emphasizes its ability to stand alone, without necessarily benefiting from a comparative reading alongside Milton's original (*Johnson's* 130). Both of these are accurate descriptions of Johnson's project; however, they are not always both applicable to the erasures that followed in *Radi os*'s wake. The extent to which more contemporary erasures do or do not reflect Hair's conclusions, therefore, represents a valuable rubric for measuring the extent of the genre's plurality.

The bulk of Janet Holmes's *The Ms of My Kin*, her erasure of Emily Dickinson's poems from the years of the American Civil War, could be said to split Hair's descriptions of *Radi os*'s enactment of intertextuality: while Holmes's poems, like Johnson's, are only indirectly enriched by being read alongside their sources, Holmes

explicitly weaves a variety of intertexts into her work by emphasizing the multiple

contexts of her writing situation. In her notes, Holmes states that her poems reference or

take up the voices of a long list of individuals involved in the events surrounding the 9/11

attacks and the 2003 Iraq War, including named and anonymous soldiers, victims,

religious leaders, and politicians (169). Since identifying the specific individuals and

events alluded to in most of the poems is nonetheless extremely difficult, Holmes's

"Notes" demands that readers immerse themselves in the textual landscapes of the Iraq

War era if they are to decode the poems' complete contexts. Interestingly, Holmes makes

a similar demand on behalf of Emily Dickinson's poetry, though not in the sense of

asking readers to reproduce her compositional process by cross-referencing her passages

with those from which they are erased. The extent to which Holmes overwrites

Dickinson's intentions in individual words and poems is such that direct comparison is

almost meaningless; Holmes's pithy "It matters / that the oil / is gone" in "1861.12

(247)"—clearly a reference to the economic importance of petroleum to American

foreign policy in the early 2000s—draws from Dickinson's explicitly metaphorical

staging of a wick and lamp oil in poem 233 ("The Lamp burns sure — within —"

[Dickinson 106]). Even if "1861.12 (247)" can be read as a distant response to Dickinson

(although the vast differences between their themes and topics would make defining the

authors' positions difficult), the disjunction between the two authors is cemented by

Holmes's practice of composing single poems using text drawn from multiple successive

Dickinson poems—which, as has been common throughout their publication history, are

sequenced chronologically rather than thematically.

The relationship Holmes establishes between *The Ms of My Kin* and Dickinson's poems is not largely based on the voice, style, argument, or theme of their texts, but on Holmes's and Dickinson's historical contexts as writers working in the midst of major American wars. In short, one of the questions at the heart of *The Ms of My Kin* interrogates the triangulation of American identity, modern war, and the craft of writing across historical periods. For Holmes, then, the fact that engaging with *The Ms of My Kin* does not require a close reading of Dickinson's poems does not preclude its reliance on "a trail of references," specifically where those references illuminate the historical circumstances of writing rather than reproducing Holmes's source texts themselves. The difference points to a crucial disjunction between Johnson's and Holmes's uses of superficially similar erasure techniques: while Johnson's erasures consist of ahistorical assertions in the environs of Milton's themes and arguments, Holmes's act as a transhistorical bridge spanning precise spatial and temporal realities.

Yet Johnson's and Holmes's poems remain deeply similar in that each can stand alone as poetry in the conventional sense: each can be interpreted, independent of its source, as a singly authored text with a complete and unified meaning. It is in regard to this question of genre that Jen Bervin's *Nets*, one of the most praised and reprinted erasures of William Shakespeare's sonnets,[5] elaborates yet another trajectory for poetic

---

[5] Other notable erasures of the sonnets include Stephen Ratcliffe's *[where late the sweet] BIRDS SANG* and Gregory Betts's *The Others Raisd in Me*, both of which are catalogued in Gilbert's *Reprint*. Betts's book is especially notable, both for its methodological differences from Bervin's—rather than producing a single erasure of each sonnet, Betts rewrites sonnet 150 many times, in the process using its lexical and textual elements to convey a wide variety of themes and meanings far outside the realm of Shakespeare's (Gilbert, *Reprint* 421-25)—and for its theoretical differences. *The Others Raisd in Me* is subtitled *a plunderverse project*, referring to Betts's "Plunderverse: A Cartographic Manifesto," in which he outlines the concerns

erasure. While neither Johnson nor Holmes provides a textual apparatus for comparative reading of his or her work alongside its source, *Nets* makes comparative reading virtually unavoidable, since it presents the discarded parts of Shakespeare's complete poems in grey type surrounding Bervin's selections. The book's making plain the transhistorical collaboration between Bervin and Shakespeare is, moreover, fully in agreement with the poetic strategy of Bervin's compositions. In her "Working Note," Bervin states that she "stripped Shakespeare's sonnets bare to the 'nets' to make the space of the poems open, porous, possible—a divergent elsewhere" (*Nets*). Yet each of Bervin's "nets" also captures the essential meaning of its sonnet by means of summary, and it is this interplay between inspiration and replication—which takes place via the constellation of Shakespeare's and Bervin's texts, but belongs to neither by itself—that makes *Nets* remarkable. Bervin's selections are richest when they introduce imagery or phrasing that develops Shakespeare's sentiments in surprisingly precise ways; therefore, they are best appreciated in the context of their relationship with the direction and accomplishments of each original sonnet.

Bervin's treatment of Shakespeare's sonnet 8, which appears in *Nets* as follows, exemplifies this effect:

> Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?
>
> Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy;

---

behind his methodology. Where Bervin attends closely to interweaving the meanings of her and Shakespeare's poems, Betts's approach focuses much more on the broad potential for language's material elements to motivate divergent meanings. As Betts puts it, "Plunderverse makes poetry through other people's words" and in doing so "exaggerates the constraints through which we realize and discover our own voice, re-enacting the struggle against influences and cultural histories" ("Plunderverse").

Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,

Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?

If the true concord of well-tunèd sounds,

By unions married, do offend thine ear,

They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds

In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.

Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,

Strikes **each in each** by mutual ordering;

Resembling sire, and child, and happy mother,

Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing;

Whose **speechless song, being many, seeming one**,

Sings this to thee: 'Thou single wilt prove none.'

In his original poem, Shakespeare urges the young addressee of his earlier sonnets into family life by emphasizing how the individual parts of a more complete unit—be it a harmonious musical composition or a nuclear family—combine into a superior expression. While Bervin's selection reflects her general agreement with Shakespeare's position, it also mounts an intervention through its multi-faceted taking up of both the word and the idea of "singleness."

    "Singleness" in Shakespeare's poem refers solely to the atomistic thinking chided by the speaker, yet Bervin, by instead incorporating "singleness" into her expression of the poem's praises, introduces two potential divergences from Shakespeare's theme. First, Bervin's "singleness" may be read as referring to the unity of the "speechless song"

constituted by musical harmony or familial relation, in which case her rewriting nuances

Shakespeare's argument: if the "speechless song," too, is a kind of singleness, then

Shakespeare is not asking the youth to abandon individuality for the sake of the many, but

to ascend to a higher singleness than that which he can achieve alone. Alternatively,

however, Bervin's selection can be understood as retaining the depraved meaning of

"singleness" represented by the youth, but more substantially manipulating the intended

meanings of the other words it borrows from Shakespeare. In this case, Bervin suggests

that even those things that appear single are in fact not—that is, while "seeming one,"

they are in fact "many"—because each singularity is determined by the interaction or

"speechless song" of hidden parts. Ultimately, these two interpretations strengthen each

other as well as Shakespeare's meaning, since they suggest that true singleness is not only

inferior but also illusory, and that the greatest strength is therefore found in the explicit

gathering of many elements in cooperation. Moreover, Bervin's sonnet 8 (although in this

sense it is unique among the pieces collected in *Nets*) also affirms her particular

application of erasure as a means of asymmetrical collaboration, wherein each

contribution to the resultant concrete text is amplified by the variegated communication

between its voices.

Taken together, Johnson's, Holmes's, and Bervin's works demonstrate that the

semantic or intentional structures allowed for by erasure are inherently plural,

encompassing indefinite combinations of authorial decisions (as well as non-decisions) in

numerous dimensions of textuality, materiality, and communication. Yet Esdale's figure

of "intensive reading"—which, with some variation, may be applied to any erasure

methodology—makes clear that the field of this plurality must be distinguished from intertextual multiplicity in Barthes's sense; indeed, in light of the many literary kinds that result from practices of "intensive reading," the expansive patchwork or "tissue of quotations" that Barthes frames as the antidote to individual sovereignty (146) begins to look ironically univocal. Even Holmes's *The Ms of My Kin*, which is among the most intertextual of erasures, uses the technique of erasure in part to constrain her work's resonances, drawing attention to a kind of transtextual tunnel from Dickinson's Civil War to her own Iraq War whose strength is in part its exclusion of the more readily available intertexts usually referenced by scholars of either phenomenon. This kind of asymmetrical push and pull, I argue, exemplifies erasure as a method of writing. Despite their differences, each of the poetic works discussed in this chapter fits Selinger's description of *Radi os* as a work that "subsumes its implicit and evident will-to-fragmentation" (48), employing the asymmetrical structure of subsumption to make manifest a finite plurality of semantic effects at arm's length from both fragmentation and unity—not to mention implication and evidence, or even will and destiny.

* * *

Considering the structural parallels between them, it is not surprising that Derrida's writing *sous rature* is often invoked alongside discussions of erasure poetry.

Few commentators, however, acknowledge that the political allegiances of both genres remain fraught. In this regard, Andre Furlani's conclusion that *Radi os* "is writing *sous rature*, canceled language enjoying posterity even from beneath the annulling stroke" (88), is exemplary. Alongside his comparisons of Johnson's poem to the manifest surface of Sigmund Freud's mystic writing pad and the tip of Ernest Hemingway's iceberg (88), Furlani's description explicitly positions the erased text of *Paradise Lost* as a force operating in concert with Johnson's authorial intentions, ultimately acting as a "buoy" (Furlani 88) for *Radi os* despite the nuanced differences between the two works. However, Furlani's framework also implies a far more controversial characterization of Derrida's philosophical writing: for Furlani's analogy to work, Derridean deconstruction must be similarly buoyed by the metaphysical terminology Derrida erases, downplaying the extent to which his thought would also constitute a criticism of or alternative to metaphysics. One might say that for Furlani, Derrida's writing under erasure is essentially post-metaphysical, but only superficially anti-metaphysical; in other words, what is erased in writing under erasure acts more as a support than an enemy to the hand that erases it.

If Derrida's philosophical erasures and Johnson's, Holmes's, and Bervin's poetic erasures are indeed connected, the latter body of texts would appear to affirm Furlani's implication, since these authors see themselves, for the most part, as respectful inheritors of the literary traditions embodied by the texts they treat. In the last decade, however, some writers—and especially writers of colour, such as Sonnet L'Abbé and Solmaz Sharif—have begun to recognize the previously unremarked affinity between erasure

poetry and what may be called the oppositional trajectory of Derridean thought, whereby

placing text under erasure establishes it less as a resource to draw from than a problem to

define oneself against. One significant contributor to this realization is erasure's ability,

especially as it migrates between aesthetic and political applications of language, to

shuttle between the seemingly opposite poles of preservation and annihilation; as Sharif

insightfully observes, "the proliferation of erasure as a poetic tactic in the United States is

happening alongside a proliferation of our awareness of it as a state tactic." While this

disparity can be partly understood according to theoretical frameworks, as I hope to have

shown in my discussion of erasure's appearance in Heidegger's and Derrida's

philosophical writings, its concrete manifestations across political and artistic genres are

far-reaching and highly variegated. Many of these manifestations are catalogued in

Stephen Voyce's "Reading the Redacted," which focuses on the relationship between

documents whose publication bears the traces of state censorship and visual and textual

artworks that explicitly respond to state censorship through their content and form. In my

study, however, I have chosen to focus on literary works whose treatment of these

themes, though equally serious, is far more analogical than directly citational, and

consequently more indebted to Western conventions of literary authorship (including

those of the erasure poetry discussed above) than to the fine arts and activist traditions

highlighted by Voyce. Within this relatively narrow field, several writers' attention to

Sharif's troubling observation has led them to pursue an erasure poetics notably distinct

from that of Johnson, Holmes, and Bervin: in these erasures, the source text is not a

respected literary classic whose artistic genius is employed to "buoy" a new creation, but

instead an ideologically distant, often somehow non- or "less" literary text whose

existence constitutes a problem or threat to the erasurist's very ability to claim authorship.

M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 *Zong!*, one of the most extensively studied works

frequently classified as erasure poetry, exemplifies this poetic strategy, and it is often

cited as an inspiration for more recent works in this vein. In *Zong!*, Philip places

appropriation and erasure at the centre of her poetic approach to the 1781 *Zong* massacre,

in which the crew of the British ship *Zong*, delayed en route to Jamaica, killed 132 of the

African slaves on board by throwing them into the ocean (Lewis 364).[6] While the crew

claimed the killing was necessary to ration water for the remaining passengers, they were

at least partly motivated by the income expected from their subsequent claim on

insurance, which, considering the slaves to be cargo, insured their deaths by violence

stemming from insurrection but not by natural causes (Walvin 67).[7] Although the ship's

crew and owners were never charged for murder, the case was brought to court as a result

of the insurance company's refusal to pay out. Finally, it is the two-page summary of the

ensuing case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, that acts as the source text for each of *Zong!*'s poems.

Despite the similarities between her method of erasure (especially in the first part

of *Zong!*) and those of her predecessors, Philip's choice of source text substantially alters

the context of her work. In the first place, that *Zong!* positions itself against both a pre-

existing text and the actual events represented by that text transforms the means by which

---

[6] In addition, 10 slaves leaped overboard of their own volition (Lewis 364).
[7] As Walvin recounts, it was unclear whether insurance could be claimed for slaves killed in order to prevent the deaths of other slaves by natural causes, as was ostensibly the case on the *Zong* (67). Regardless, it is clear from the circumstances that the crew's motivation for committing the mass murder was primarily economic.

it attempts to intervene in historical or lived reality; while erasures of canonical works frame authorship (as well as their challenges to it) as a primarily literary phenomenon, *Zong!*'s interrogation of legal discourse highlights the direct role of authorial responsibility—extending to and including Philip's own authorship of *Zong!*—in questions of personhood and oppression. Moreover, the distinction between *Zong!* and its methodological predecessors is compounded by the fact that Philip must cannibalize a voice—specifically that of *Gregson v. Gilbert*'s judges, for whom the *Zong*'s African passengers were not legal persons—whose fundamental assumptions are existentially opposed to her own. These differences both raise the stakes of Philip's work and force a distinct shift in its attitude toward its source text. *Zong!* can by no means leave *Gregson v. Gilbert*'s pronouncements unchallenged, and in this sense the latter cannot be said to benignly "buoy" Philip's work (Furlani 88). Nor can the two texts be framed as comfortably conjoined parts of the same overall corpus, as Furlani implies in his analogy with the manifest tip and submerged mass of Hemingway's metaphorical iceberg (88). Rather, Philip must expose and reverse *Gregson v. Gilbert*'s vast oversights while positioning her own voice as a strict divergence from that of the court's, even when the only basis for doing so must (at least according to Philip's self-imposed constraint) be found within the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* itself.

The differences between Philip's and previous erasures are indeed significant, and they should not be reduced to the status of trivial diversities marshalled under the banner

of "experimental writing."[8] Nonetheless, I argue that they should be seen as indicating

neither a fundamental split within erasure poetry nor a more politicized development or

offshoot,[9] since understanding the work of Philip and her successors by this rubric would

be a disservice to both of the categories or kinds of erasure it would subsequently delimit.

For Johnson's and others' erasures of canonical works, it would mean ignoring the extent

to which exploring techniques and conventions still at the margins of the literary tradition

genuinely alters that tradition's relationship with political reality. For Philip's *Zong!*,

meanwhile, it would mean substituting activist ideological concerns for the more

ambiguous and thought-provoking interrogations of ideology that are in fact among the

greatest consequences of Philip's efforts.

In the first place, my studies of writing under erasure in Heidegger's and Derrida's

theoretical contexts suggest that erasure does not promote the entrenchment of fixed

binaries, but instead pluralizes the instances of double/cross that adhere to its

interpretation within and between texts. Just as an erased word thickens the trajectories of

paleonym and erasure without finally separating them from each other, the application of

erasure by different means, to different source texts, and in different contexts extends the

technique's potential for variation while multiplying the intersections between its species.

---

[8] Dworkin and Goldsmith's assertion, which closes their entry on *Zong!* in *Against Expression*, that the book "détourne[s] legal language in the service of experimental writing" (484) has become a point of contention for many readers of Philip's work. Betts's "Not against expression," for example, criticizes Dworkin and Goldsmith for emphasizing Philip's aesthetic motivations ahead of her ethical and political ones. In Betts's view, every aspect of Philip's relationship to an English or more broadly Western literary tradition (even in its most experimental dimensions) must be considered alongside her identification with and advocacy for groups that have historically been excluded from that tradition.
[9] See L'Abbé's "Tree, I Invented a New Form of Poem," in which she distinguishes sharply between the "serious" quality of Johnson's erasure (as Johnson put it in an interview) and the "real seriousness" of Philip's work.

In real terms, however, the thickness erasure introduces to both philosophical and literary texts demands a critical practice attentive to the individual acts of responsibility constituted by those texts across various dimensions of their production, dissemination, and reception. For this reason, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to a comparative reading of Philip's *Zong!* and Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*, which erases passages from Canadian ethnographer Marius Barbeau's 1950 *Totem Poles* in order to interrogate the construction and devaluation of modern Canadian indigenous identity. Leaving aside the question of whether Philip's and Abel's contributions to various forms of identity politics can or should be conflated with a common cause, reading their work from the perspective of literary criticism draws out key differences in their respective understandings of erasure, political literature, and textuality, as well as surprising affiliations between their projects and the erasures of canonical works discussed above. As authors, both Philip and Abel eschew the possibility of harmonizing their methods, ethics, and messages at a deep level, and the divergent trajectories that emerge from this plurality are crucial to their effective use of erasure techniques.

* * *

As Kate Siklosi notes in her essay subtitled "the submarine poetic of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*," Philip's overall project centres on elaborating a nonlinear, fragmentary,

and polyvocal poetics that both disrupts and completes the blinkered linear narrative of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. As Siklosi writes, "the legal document is dis-membered and then re-membered in its fragments; in so doing, Philip interrupts the perceived wholeness of this surface account of history as singularly authoritative, revealing the voices of a resistant submarine unity beneath the waves of the surface's forgetting." Key to this process is the way in which poetic language's ambiguity and materiality—what Siklosi calls "the deep of [maritime law's] own language"—simultaneously precipitates the breakdown of meaning and renders the living event more fully than the court decision, since the latter only accomplishes its cohesiveness or "solidity" (Nolan 22) by way of its blindness to the deep injustices of slavery. Among Philip's most important strategies is her attention to the resonances produced by the sound of language: by stringing together near homonyms or homophones in English and between English and other languages—"sang" and "*sang*" (French for "blood"), "us" and "*ius*" (Latin for "law" or "right"), "oh my" or "oh me" and "*omi*" (Yoruba for "water")—Philip undermines the syntactical processes of categorization and equation upon which legal discourse depends. Philip's technical approach to poetry, however, must be understood in the context of how she "draw[s] attention to words as phenomena—that variously hold together, break, and fail"—and thus foregrounds an experiential relationship between reader and text centred on the question "*How do I read?*" (Nolan 25). The resultant ambivalence or even anxiety, as Rachel Nolan puts it (25), is essential to the text's ability to promote ethical thinking and rethinking of the letter of the law.

The effects Nolan describes come through strongly in the following passage,

which, though typical of the later sections of *Zong!*, offers one of the book's most striking

impositions of ambivalent reading trajectories:

> the same they   suffered *omi o*
>   *mio*   *mi* o my go
>   d *o*   *mi* water if
>   *ifá* can if   *ifá* can
>   if only *i*
>   *fá* can all   that rema
>   ins are
>   words I do   not ow   n they t
>   read water   then they sin
>   k un
>   der the we   ight of *a*
>   *men s ave s*   *& salve s* the flag
>   falls a nation   mourns my fate
>
> (129)

Alongside the spacing out of words and phrases that contributes to the unique rhythm of

reading *Zong!*, this passage presents the reader with constant anxieties regarding how to

implement, postpone, or revise their constructions of meaning. Through Philip's use of

spacing, enjambment, sonic repetition, and multilingualism, the reader is initially pulled

between indications of the speaker's personal culpability—"me" or "*mi*" and "*i*"—and

the impersonal natural or divine forces represented by "god," "*omi*," and "*ifá*" (a West

African divination system). Following on this refrain, the passage's enjambments further

problematize its ascription of responsibility and agency, for example in the distinctions

between "t / read water" and "read water" (which can be understood as "read 'water'" or

"*omi*," a "word I do / not ow / n"), "then they sin" and "then they sin / k," "un / der the

we" and "un / der the we / ight," and "*a / men*" and "*men*." Each of these pairs stresses

the distinction between a natural, physical, or divine process and an act of human

consciousness or agency, forcing the reader into the position of constantly doubting their

construction of the predominant sense of the narrative.

One interpretation of *Zong!*'s persistent imposition of experiential and non-linear meaning is distinctly ontological: according to this view, Philip's insistence on obfuscating any single reading of the text demonstrates her preference for the inassimilable truth of what "is" against the reductive, linear, and binaristic narratives of official history and law. As Alexandra Shultheis Moore, who advances this interpretation most univocally, puts it in "'Dispossession Within the Law,'" "the poem insists repeatedly [that] the massacre on the *Zong* persists, 'is,' and cannot be put to rest through an appeal to synthesis, legal judgment, moral truth, or a grand narrative of history" (183). In this sense, Philip's project can be understood as a recovery of the unthinkable complexity of the *Zong* massacre as an ontological event, exposing its scant historical and legal documentation to the illogical and affectively-charged depths of its transhistorical phenomenality.

By following Philip's development of this theme throughout the book, one can see this ontology gradually come into bloom. One of the book's early poems, "*Zong!* #4" (included in the section titled "Os"), emphasizes *Zong!*'s extraction of an ontologically complete vision of transhistorical reality (i.e., what "is") from the historicizing and moralistic discourses that have otherwise defined the massacre (i.e., what "was" or "should be"). The text presents this through repetition, contradiction, and the spacing of its statements across three columns, the leftmost of which emerges only at the end of the poem to cement its grounding in the living present:

this is

not was

or

should be

this be

not

should be

this

should

not

be

is

(Philip, *Zong!* 7)

For Shultheis Moore, Philip's emphasis on what "is" in early poems such as "*Zong!* #4"

sets the ontological framework for her elaboration of a more fluid sense of being in

Zong!'s later sections, which Philip refers to as the "flesh" of the book ("*os*" being Latin

for "bone" [200]). By the second to last section, "Ferrum," the ontological theme that

"*Zong!* #4" originally carves from the strictly legal discourse of *Gregson v. Gilbert* is

invoked through the material ambiguity of the English language itself, specifically in the

tension between "no is" and "noise": "th / ere w / as / no / is / e of neg / roes oh th / e no /

is / e" (Philip, *Zong!* 139). Here, the epistemological judgment that there is "no is" of

negroes—because the British legal system had judged that they are not human beings—is

exposed and ultimately subordinated to Philip's alternative affirmation of the "noise of

negroes," not only because the existence or "being" of noise, regardless of its dissonance, is undeniable, but because the linguistic shape and sound of "no is" are themselves noise in relation to *Zong!*'s fractured mechanism of communication. In the book's short final section, "Ebora," Philip's vision of a cacophony of being emerges in full force, as any remnants of the poems' legibility are almost entirely replaced by textual fragments printed in various shades of grey. By incessantly overlapping and cancelling each other's narrative trajectories, these fragments depict a world entirely unencumbered by linear determinations of meaning.

Philip's approach to the ontological implications of silence, irrationality, and the material characteristics of language invites fruitful comparisons with Cage and Mac Low's appropriation-based writing. Like these earlier works, Philip's project begins by critiquing language's replication of structures of linear interpretation and authorial possession—which, in her source text, connect directly to the dehumanization and possession of human slaves—and offers an alternative poetics of nonlinear, polyvocal engagement with multiple experiential dimensions of text, meaning, and event. However, the material contexts of Philip's writing *Zong!*—including her own position as author, the legal and historical situation of her source text, and the historicity of the event to which it refers (which itself occurred nearly 50 years before the case summary was published [Oldham 310])—profoundly distinguishes the experience of reading and thinking with Philip's work from the ontological all-inclusiveness stressed by Shultheis Moore. This difference could be understood as a *paleonymic* difference, since it is primarily based in the difference between the appropriated texts to which Philip, Cage, and Mac Low apply

relatively similar formal methods. Yet this should not diminish the importance of its effect; ultimately, the unique characteristics of *Gregson v. Gilbert* permeate *Zong!*'s entire aesthetic and political endeavour. In general, *Zong!* maintains the feeling of being determined by restriction and constraint to a much greater extent than Cage's anarchist experimentation: for example, Cage's often repeated quotation of Norman O. Brown, "[w]hat we finally seek to do is to create an environment that works so well we can run wild in it" (*Anarchy* ix), could hardly be applied to Philip's effort. Where earlier erasurists tended to perceive their source texts either as inspirations for their own world views and practices (Cage, Johnson) or as chance encounters with little to no meaning in themselves (Mac Low, Phillips), Philip, and to a significant extent her readers, experiences both *Gregson v. Gilbert* and the historical circumstances to which it refers as nearly insurmountable obstacles to creative composition. As she puts it, describing the intent of her project in the book's "Notanda," "[she] would lock [her]self in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*" (Philip, *Zong!* 191).

The distinction between Philip's and earlier erasures also manifests in her unique approach to the question of her work's authorship. Like many of the authors discussed elsewhere in my dissertation, Philip insists that her process has "entirely absolved [her] of 'authorial intention'" (King); however, where many experimentalists perceive their non-authorship as liberatory for themselves and their readers, for Philip it accompanies a critical anxiety over her responsibility for telling a story that she insists cannot be told, yet must be (as she suggests repeatedly throughout *Zong!*'s "Notanda"). While Philip's

name remains the most prominent on *Zong!*'s cover and in its publication information, the book bears the attribution "as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng," a composite figure Philip invented to represent the ancestral spirit of the Africans held aboard the *Zong*. Philip's travelling to Africa specifically to seek spiritual guidance regarding the attribution of her work, a journey she narrates at length in "Notanda" and elsewhere, also demonstrates a much more conflicted attitude toward appropriation than that of her modern literary forerunners. Where earlier experiments celebrated the liberation of their authors and readers from the framework of authorial intention and expression, Philip's is dogged by the ethical problem of how to resist the discursive regime of authorial possession while also restoring the voices of historical subjects who have been denied the opportunity to speak. In stark contrast to Shultheis Moore's characterization of *Zong!* as an ontological totalization of the *Zong* massacre, Veronica J. Austen's "*Zong!*'s 'Should we?'" suggests that these problems of representation and witnessing, as well as the book's expanded awareness of their intractability, are the predominant theme of Philip's work.

The difficulties surrounding Philip's authorial responsibility for the work of *Zong!*, however, are not limited to her relationship with the massacre's victims; beyond the scope of Austen's argument, Philip's navigation of the blurred boundaries between excavating, condemning, and replicating the dynamics of representation (at various points legal, moral, and literary) that sealed those victims' fate comes with its own series of challenging double/crosses. Many of these are best captured by Philip's own comments on the process of writing *Zong!*, such as the passage below, in which she invokes the

uncanny affiliation between her method of composition and the methods of brutality and subjugation employed by the very system she is committed to resisting. Philip writes,

> The poems [in *Zong!*] resist my attempts at meaning or coherence and, at times, I too approach the irrationality and confusion, if not madness (*madness is outside of the box of order*), of a system that could enable, encourage even, a man to drown 150 people as a way to maximize profits—the material and the nonmaterial. Or is it the immaterial? Within the boundaries established by the words and their meanings there are silences; within each silence is the poem, which is revealed only when the text is fragmented and mutilated, mirroring the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans, their customs and ways of life. (*Zong!* 195)

Philip's reflections illustrate a set of binaries she cannot fix in a stable alignment, since their terms continually cross between Philip's project and that of the culture and economy of slavery she resists. Both projects repeatedly yet unpredictably fall on the same side of Philip's guiding binaries, suggesting a risk of affiliation between *Zong!* and its source text that underlies the project's instability.

While Philip's obvious condemnation of slavery might lead readers to assume that she would unequivocally reject its methods, the above passage indicates that Philip and the system of slavery travel parallel hermeneutic trajectories, since each departs from a unified order or meaning to arrive at an irrational fragmentation mirroring the other's. This revelation suggests, on one hand, that *Zong!*'s most poignant means of condemning

slavery may depend on repeating its method, "fragmenting and mutilating" again where

the captain and crew of the *Zong* had already done so. In this sense, Philip's "irrational"

poetry could claim to offer a more accurate representation (in the sense of the German

Darstellung, or depiction) of slavery than *Gregson v. Gilbert*, which Philip describes

elsewhere in "Notanda" as "masquerading as order, logic, and rationality" (*Zong!* 197).

On the other hand, however, Philips also links *Zong!*'s "fragmentation and mutilation" to

its recovery of a truth contained within *Gregson v. Gilbert*, "reading" that truth not as a

depiction of slavery's manifest realities but as a material trace of the submerged "life"

slavery sought to erase (*Zong!* 194).

Thus, while Philip's book allows its affiliation with the historical facts of slavery

to be interpreted both as *Darstellung* and as *Vertretung*—that is, representation not by

mimetic depiction but by the instantiation of a proxy or "agent of power," as Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak puts it in her warning against the elision of these two

representational forms ("Subaltern" 279)—these two interpretations cannot coexist, since

they rely on opposed understandings of the purpose and effect of Philip's methodology as

either destruction or recovery. This bivalence is further reflected in Philip's framing of

the material and the nonmaterial—and perhaps also in Philip's waffling over the

designation "nonmaterial" itself. While Philip insists that the language of law "has both

material and nonmaterial outcomes," she leaves ambiguous which of the categories refers

to financial loss or benefit and which refers to "an individual's physical freedom,

confirmation of civil or human rights, or even death" (*Zong!* 191). Moreover, Philip's

own project could be described as highlighting both material and nonmaterial or

immaterial elements, in the former case through her attention to the sonic and visual materiality of the language locked within *Gregson v. Gilbert*, and in the latter case through her recognition of *Zong!* as a "hauntological" project rooted in the persistence of memory and meaning in lieu of physical remains (*Zong!* 201-202). Overall, these deliberations demonstrate only some of the doublings and reversals that adhere to virtually every binary pair highlighted in Philip's "Notanda."

* * *

That "fragmentation and mutilation" may be a reprehensible tactic of political oppression, an expository representation or allegory of that oppression, or a means of uncovering what subtends and transcends that oppression makes clear that Philip's demonstrations of her method and intent are saturated with double/crossings. While virtually every aspect of her writing—from the content of *Zong!* to the method of its production to its relationship with *Gregson v. Gilbert* and the *Zong* massacre—can be understood according to a plurality of oppositional trajectories, these trajectories remain entangled in that each helps articulate the text's affiliations in other dimensions of meaning. If Philip's work communicates "self-awareness of one's relationship with the traumatic past," as Austen argues (79), it is able to heal the amnesia of its source text (Philip, *Zong!* 204) only by methodologically repeating the violence that underlies it. If,

in contrast, Philip's key intervention is to shift *Gregson v. Gilbert*'s legalistic framing of

the *Zong* massacre toward that of a more historically and ontologically complete work of

mourning, the effectiveness of her divergent methodology is premised on the idea that

everything there is to say about the massacre is already articulated within *Gregson v.*

Gilbert, "locked in th[e] text" (Philip, *Zong!* 191), without having been irrevocably

distorted or forgotten. It cannot suffice, then, to define these aspects of Philip's work

within any stable system of binary terms, since those terms' affiliations are continually

reversed by the textual apparatus. Rather, one might instead suggest that, across the

durations of these doublings, there is only an ever-thickening chain or mesh of

responsible agents (ranging from the slaves and crew who experienced the *Zong* massacre

to the critics and readers who decide how to interpret Philip's and the court's documents),

held together (and apart) by history. Despite Philip's conflicting appeals to the formal

determination of her text by *Gregson v. Gilbert* and to its authentic origin in the voice of

Setaey Adamu Boateng, she is also undeniably right to state that "*[t]his time […] I do the*

tearing" (*Zong!* 192); whatever and wherever *Zong!* is, Philip is responsible for what it

does.

Among the most remarkable characteristics of Philip's book is the fact that the

poems of its first section, "Os," both appropriate the original text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*

most faithfully[10] and expound Philip's critical response to the *Zong* massacre and its

---

[10] Midway through "Notanda," Philip includes a letter discussing her movement away from techniques of erasure more strictly defined—such as "carving words out of other words" (*Zong!* 198) or "whit[ing] out and black[ing] out words" (*Zong!* 193)—in late 2003 (*Zong!* 200). At this later stage, whose results in fact make up most of the pages of *Zong!*, Philip turned to composing using a "dictionary," derived from the initial text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, of "'mother' words" and words anagrammatically derived from them

documentation most explicitly. I argue that this split within the text of "Os," which gradually diminishes as *Zong!*'s subsequent sections develop more imaginative retelling of the event, best represents Philip's use of erasure as a technology of double/crossing. Despite the fact that the bulk of *Zong!* strays from erasure methodology as it is normally defined, Philip's stricter use of the technique in "Os" is crucial, since it allows her to graft her retelling to the concrete historical traces of the massacre (however poorly those traces represent the truth of the event). Through erasure and its uniquely asymmetrical doubling of the *paleonym*, *Zong!* acts as a means of participation in the remembrance and mourning of the *Zong* massacre—along with questioning the very viability of these responses—rather than simply retelling it linearly. In Almas Khan's words, Philip's constraint allows her to maintain a "sensitiv[ity] to the position of readers (and herself) as secondary witnesses," evading the deficiencies of both the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report and traditional abolitionist elegies to the victims of the *Zong* massacre (19).

Nonetheless, the very same technique that allows Philip to construct an alternative to these traditional narratives also pushes her to emphasize—in "Os" more than any other part of the book—that her poetry is, in fact, an alternative in the most univocal sense. In order to retain the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* while simultaneously using it to seed a narrative with very different intentions and perspectives, Philip drives an almost literal wedge between those fragments of the source material she can recover for her cause and those she must condemn. This is accomplished most effectively by the poems' being

(Philip, *Zong!* 200). While these later compositions retain the visual interplay of fragmented text and blank spaces originally derived from the earlier erasures' method, the actual arrangement of words and spaces is Philip's.

structured into columns resembling legal ledgers, within which "the language of law and

of poetry compete as two oppositional systems of knowledge production" (Siklosi). In

"*Zong!* #4" (quoted above), for example, Philip's columns generate a reading rhythm

emphasizing the difference between historical or idealistic discourses and the discourse of

ontological presence. As I argued previously, *Zong!* does not finally stabilize patterns of

binary classification that could be extrapolated to the entire work. However, unlike the

fluid spacing of the book's later sections, the visual and semantic compositions in "Os"

foreground patterns of binary interaction that indicate *Zong!*'s inseparability from a basic

moral position in direct contrast to that of *Gregson v. Gilbert*.

In "*Zong!* #12," Philip uses a structure similar to the ledgers in "*Zong!* #4" to

more directly isolate the abstract and often obfuscating discourse of the law in *Gregson v.*

Gilbert:

it

is said

has been decided

was justified

appeared impossible

is not necessary

is another ground

need not be proved

it

was a throwing overboard

it

is a particular circumstance

need not be proved

is another ground

is not necessary

appeared impossible

was justified

has been decided

is said

it

was

(*Zong!* 21-22)

Although "*Zong!* #12" uses language culled entirely from *Gregson v. Gilbert*, Philip's composition designates a clear split between at least two contexts in which those words are used, which in turn suggest divergent trajectories of intention and representation. The division is indicated visually in two ways: it is shown most obviously through the arrangement of the two discourses into separate columns, but it is also signalled by the poem's shifts in alignment and positioning, which cause the reading eye to slow down and stumble over the transitions between discourses.

Philip's selection of language from *Gregson v. Gilbert* in each cluster also conveys two distinct approaches to the depiction of the event; these are distinguished linguistically by the difference between, first, the concrete reference and simplistic

construction of words and phrases like "a throwing overboard" and the abject pronoun "it," and second, the abstract, Latinate constructions highlighted in the right-hand column. Among the most poignant reminders of this distinction is the appearance of "ground" in the right-hand column, since, despite appearing as a distinctly Germanic word with the potential to indicate a concrete object, any literal meaning of the word is clearly irrelevant to the maritime setting of the massacre. Instead of drawing attention to material reality, then, the poem's use of "ground" emphasizes how *Gregson v. Gilbert* erases concrete facts in the course of constructing imperialist abstractions. This slippage, moreover, also points to the spatial distinction between the two discourses in "*Zong! #12*," as the first refers solely to what happened on the ship while the second tells the very different story of what occurred in the courtroom—which was, of course, located on solid ground. Overall, these distinctions elucidate the inequalities of language, power, and place that accompany the distinction in case law between *ratio* and *dicta*, which Philip (herself a lawyer by training) invokes as a model for her interpretation of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case summary. According to Philip, a case's *ratio* is "the kernel of the legal principle at the heart of the decision […]. Having isolated that, all other opinion becomes *obiter dicta*, informally referred to as *dicta*. Which is what the Africans on board the *Zong* become—*dicta*, footnotes, related to, but not, the *ratio*" (199). In "*Zong! #12*," the division between *ratio* and *dicta*—though applied formulaically in case analysis—is reiterated and transformed across poetic, historical, and material dimensions.

While Philip's process clearly challenges both the definition and the valuation of the *ratio* in *Gregson v. Gilbert*, her means of doing so is not homogeneous across *Zong!*'s

poems, and they are rarely as straightforward as the method used in "*Zong!* #12." For example, all of the poems in "Os" are accompanied by an additional spatial division even more prominent than their separation into columns: at the bottom of each page of the section, a horizontal line separates the main text from a string of African names, which were inserted by Philip to pay homage to the Africans killed on the *Zong*'s voyage. The inclusion of these names is Philip's most explicit overturning of *Gregson v. Gilbert*'s valuation of *ratio* over *dicta*, in that she reimagines the Africans' status as footnotes to the text in such a way that this also represents their "footprint" on history (*Zong!* 200). It is impossible, however, to establish that this division governs the composition of "Os" to a greater degree than the division between the columns of "*Zong!* #12" or any other spatial, linguistic, or methodological division in the book. Indeed, even the division between the African names and the erased main text of "Os" includes a plurality of interpretive asymmetries: in addition to Philip's depiction (*Darstellung*) of the names as footnotes subjugated to the *ratio* of her source and (to a modified extent) her poetic selections from it, her representation (*Vertretung*) of the *Zong*'s African passengers as named individuals overturns their historical subjugation, since their names are not actually included in any historical records (Philip, *Zong!* 194).

Related to the more obvious spatial distinctions highlighted in "Os," then, are a plurality of divisions introduced to other dimensions of the text's meaning. One such split can be recognized between the critical tone and the descriptive content of "*Zong!* #8," which reads as follows:

the good of overboard

justified a throwing

of property

fellow

creatures

become

our portion

of

mortality

provision

a bad market

negroes

want

for dying

(Philip, *Zong!* 16)

At the level of depiction, "*Zong!* #8" is largely a summary of the rationale employed by the *Zong*'s captain for throwing the Africans overboard: the value ("our portion / of / mortality") of the slaves (both "property" and "fellow creatures") was increased by their being jettisoned ("the good of overboard") due to the "bad market," making the massacre economically justified ("negroes / want / for dying"). Tonally, however, the extreme condensation of this logic, along with Philip's juxtaposition of word pairs such as "property" and "fellow creatures" or "justified" and "throwing" (which the writer of *Gregson v. Gilbert* took care to sequester in different conceptual strains of the court's

decision), brings into focus the highly critical position from which Philip evaluates it. In "*Zong!* #8," then, the kind of division that is rendered spatially in poems like "*Zong!* #12" is transferred to a non-visual dimension of meaning, while the visual form of "*Zong!* #8" comes closer to the more fluid fragmentation found in *Zong!*'s four central sections. However, "*Zong!* #8" maintains the crucial compositional distinction that separates the poems in "Os" from the rest of Philip's book: that is, the "Os" poems' continued reliance on structures of binary distinction and doubleness rather than ambiguity and multiplicity. While the compositional style of the sections following "Os" stresses the general instability of meaning across languages, speakers, and referents, "Os" consistently forces interpretations that, although branching and ultimately plural, draw the reader's attention to Philip's reversals of asymmetrical yet distinctly binary classification schemes. Regardless of Philip's ultimate rapprochement with "the uncertain tides of poetic variation," as Siklosi puts it, the "bones" of her project in "Os" and its stricter erasure methodology betray *Zong!*'s roots in an oppositional ethos that is in fact very certain of its argument.

The explicit antagonism with which Philip's work on *Zong!* meets the court's decision in *Gregson v. Gilbert* is so obvious that it perhaps does not need to be made explicit: while Philip recognizes that the Africans on board the *Zong* were persons, the case's judges and litigators did not. Nonetheless, the explication of this antagonism is crucial to the critical understanding of *Zong!* for two reasons. First, Philip's resistance to the discourse of *Gregson v. Gilbert* should be understood and analyzed as oppositional in light of the fact that a wide range of contemporary erasure projects, in large part inspired

by Philip's, explicitly treat the technique as a means of direct resistance to the authors of their source texts.[11] Although Philip's approach to *Gregson v. Gilbert* is not solely or simply oppositional, her work is among the most influential precursors to the growing range of appropriative practices centred on resisting, undermining, and speaking back to their specific sources (in contrast to earlier appropriation-based works' targeting of a general culture of authorial originality). More importantly, however, the oppositional methodology of Philip's erasures must be recognized in order to account for the full extent of their power as discursive acts that ultimately rely on rearticulating, though in an inverted form, the transformation of language into power upon which historical regimes of legally sanctioned slavery were based. In other words, much of *Zong!*'s impact stems from the way that, rather than imagining itself through an alternative value system situated outside the dehumanizing framework of slavery (as traditional abolitionist narratives sought to do), it understands its textual work as a direct infiltration of the historical (and, to a degree, contemporary) institutions that uphold that framework. This means that Philip's "fragmentation and mutilation" of her source text, in addition to being representational in the senses of both *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*, is also a concrete act in a sense having nothing to do with representation: specifically, it is a transhistorical

---

[11] Rachel Stone's October 2017 *New Republic* article, "The Trump-Era Boom in Erasure Poetry," offers a helpful analysis of this trend. While linking contemporary anti-Trump activism to the writing practices of authors including Phillips, Bervin, Johnson, and Philip, Stone concludes that "[t]hese poems [which erase Trump's speeches and other documents linked to the president] seem to want you to know that they are poems of the #resistance." Yet Stone's somewhat unenthusiastic evaluation of erasures as a technique of resistance—which concludes that they "have an extremely limited scope," since they are more focused on exposing the bare truth of Trump's and others' language than on challenging systemic problems or interrogating their own status as erasures—also demonstrates why the political potential of these forms depends on a more nuanced theorization of the oppositional quality of erasure poetry.

dismemberment of the authorities whose actual pronouncements sanctioned the *Zong* massacre.

The nature and target of this dismemberment is figured in some of Philip's early notes from the project, which are reproduced in "Notanda": after listing some of the "*Dramatis personae* (justices and lawyers)" of the case, including "Piggott," "Mansfield," "Davenport," "Heywood," and "Buller" (*Zong!* 193), Philip proceeds to "carv[e] words" out of their names, rendering "pig," "man," "port," "field," "wood," and "bull" (*Zong!* 198). While Philip's "carving" of the justices' and lawyers' names is obviously representational, it indicates—more exactly than her ambivalent "fragmentation and mutilation" of the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*—the specific discursive violence Philip wilfully perpetrates toward the collective authorship of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision. In short, Philip treats these individuals not as persons but as traces of the court's historical power to oppress, equating their reduction to common English nouns with the conversion of human lives into property (*Zong!* 207). In turn, she silently exiles the monstrous rationality of their decisions and intentions—in other words, the concrete historical efficacy of the denial of personhood to Africans within the court's economic and legal context—from the seemingly all-encompassing realm of "being" *Zong!* holds dear. The specificity of Philip's disavowal is crucial: while she pays direct homage to *Zong*'s historically unnamed white crew in the "Manifest" section of her book,[12] and explicitly represents (and perhaps even over-represents)[13] a white male

---

[12] This gesture can be linked to Philip's visit to Liverpool, also narrated in "Notanda," during which she reflected both on the European passengers of the *Zong* who died of illness on or after the voyage and those

character in the book's most substantial sections, Philip never recognizes the white

justices' intentions, reasoning, or authority as anything other than profound ignorance or

irrationality. Philip's grieving of the *Zong*'s European passengers stops short of the legal

and economic authorities who underwrote its fate, and the white male who narrates much

of her book ultimately "realizes that his redemption lies in joining the victims" (King),

heroically forsaking his allegiance with white British society by throwing himself

overboard at the close of "Ferrum" (*Zong!* 173). Both of these eventualities speak to the

fact that Philip, in much the same way that the justices and lawyers of *Gregson v. Gilbert*

could not recognize Africans as human persons, cannot recognize the justices' and

lawyers' judgment to that effect as a human possibility.

In addition to the thematic mirroring between Philip's "fragmentation and

mutilation" of text and the Atlantic slave trade's "fragmentation and mutilation" of

Africans, then, there is also a silent mirroring between Philip's and the court's decisions

regarding a question neither addresses explicitly. Where several of the judges in *Gregson*

v. Gilbert agree that "[i]t has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the

question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property"

(211), Philip is equally willing to put the question of African peoples' personhood to one

side; the difference, of course, is that Philip proceeds from a judgment directly opposite

the court's. "Like the law," Philip writes, "I decide what is or is not" (*Zong!* 199). There

---

who, having helped to murder the Africans on board the ship, thus also brought about "the murder of their own souls" (*Zong!* 203).

[13] Philip herself raises this concern in her interview with King, stating, "My thinking went something like this: this is a work about the transatlantic slave trade and I don't want to privilege a white male European voice" (King). However, she goes on to assert that "because [she] was committed to watching, to waiting and to listening for these voices to surface, [she] had to allow that voice the space it demanded" (King).

is no question as to whether Philips could have proceeded differently, since, as an African-descended writer, for her to recognize the legitimacy of a perspective promoting her own dehumanization would mean forfeiting her right to speak in advance. However, Philip's treatment of the issue does constitute an act for which she is profoundly responsible, in that it operates asymmetrically against a worldview that is henceforth silenced by her hand. In this way, Philip's unabashedly humanist application of erasure demonstrates how responsibility manifests by way of a double/cross regardless of the legitimacy of opposing positions. Even if no one were ever to recognize the right to enslave human bodies in accordance with their racial identity—and it remains possible, however unlikely, that the ideologies of racism could one day be practically eradicated—any affirmation of personhood manifests as resistance to the fundamental risk of its own reversal.

* * *

In "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak writes that "[t]he complicity of *Vertreten* and *Darstellen*, their identity-in-difference as the place of practice […,] can only be appreciated if they are not conflated by a sleight of word" (277). Throughout *Zong!*, Philip is committed to exploring this and the many other distinctions—between being and existence, poetry and law, text and meaning, body and person, and others—whose

identity-in-difference allows her to render the physical and textual history of the *Zong*

massacre as a series of "place[s] of practice" or sites of responsibility, including that of

her own writing of *Zong!* In this way, Philip rises to Spivak's challenge to critics (in

Spivak's case, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault) to recognize their own situation in

and "institutional responsibility" ("Subaltern" 280) for the systems they critique. Yet

Philip, revelling in a poetic sensibility that contrasts sharply with Spivak's conceptual

precision, simultaneously "run[s] together" (Spivak, "Subaltern" 276) the faces of these

distinctions, drawing attention to their discursive ambiguity as a means of silently

foregrounding a linear, humanitarian pragmatics. To the extent that Philip pursues an

ultimate reverence for "being," and more specifically a notion of human being

unquestionably inclusive of African peoples, it is thus also true that she pursues "an

essentialist, utopian politics" of the kind Spivak critiques ("Subaltern" 276). While

Philip's adeptness at playing Spivak's discursive categories against each other is apparent

both in *Zong!* and in her recent nonfictional writing,[14] it is also clear that her intentions,

authorial efforts, and applications of erasure are oriented toward a nondiscursive ideal

that, for her, is fundamentally beyond effacement.

---

[14] Consider how Philip exploits the ambiguity of the word "matter" in her discussion of the Black Lives Matter movement in "Jammin' Still," the introduction to her 2017 essay collection, *Blank*. After recounting how Black lives have always "mattered" economically, "not for their intrinsic value but for their use value" (Philip, *Blank* 17), she writes, "It is in this sense that I say that Black lives have always mattered, and it is this essential dehumanization of Black lives that generates the need for us to state today what should be redundant—that Black lives do matter. For their intrinsic worth" (Philip, *Blank* 18). Later in the introduction, Philip repeats this argumentative move in relation to the issues raised by *Zong!*, reflecting on her discovery that "[o]n board the slave ship *Zong* being—being human—was simply not enough to save enslaved Africans from being thrown overboard" (*Blank* 27-28). The identity-in-difference of the word "being," where "being human" and "being thrown overboard" are both the same and radically different categories, can hardly be accidental; like the slippage between mattering for one's intrinsic value and mattering for one's use value, the shift between Philip's uses of "being" elucidates how both identification and distinction can be employed toward both the realization and the curtailment of human rights.

Like Philip's "fragmentation and mutilation," Abel's "carving"[15]—his particular

method of selecting the text of *The Place of Scraps* from Marius Barbeau's *Totem*

Poles—illuminates the interplay of *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* across time and space.

Unlike Philip, however, Abel does not seek a fluid, foundational "being" beneath their

double/crossing; rather, he encounters their enmeshment as a rigid history of

misrepresentations. Because this history cannot be corrected or rewritten, resisting it

depends on exposing and reinhabiting its legacies; as a result, Abel's process is more

atomizing than harmonizing, and his understanding of his own role as author is more

individualistic than moralistic.

This difference manifests, first of all, in Abel's adaptation of the erasure

technique, which is in a sense both more and less restricted than Philip's. While Philip

ultimately allows her poems to draw from a "universe of language" (*Zong!* 200)

encompassing far more words and tongues than are literally contained in her source, Abel

restricts his erasures to the exact letters—in the exact locations—furnished by his

appropriated selections. In this sense, the metaphor of carving is especially apt: Abel

treats his source texts like blocks of wood, ensuring that his creations not only contain no

more than the material they are made from, but also that they preserve the same knots and

grain. Yet Abel's strict attention to his source texts' materiality also allows for his

"objectification of Barbeau's writing," in that reframing Barbeau's literal words and

characters as "the raw matter of [Abel's] own textual sculpting" allows him to freely

---

[15] Abel's work is first referred to as "carving" by Christopher Bracken in his blurb for *The Place of Scraps* (iii), as well as on the book's back cover.

overwrite the earlier author's content and intentions (Betts, "Seeing" 6). Rather than an

accumulation of perspectives, the result is an exchange of absence and presence; as

Gregory Betts puts it, "the vanishing ethnographer is a figure of *decolonial poesis*"

("Seeing" 6). But this figural economy is at once indebted to erasure's concrete effects on

language, since, for Abel, erasure functions strategically as a variation on divide and

conquer: *The Place of Scraps* begins by segregating the text of *Totem Poles* from

Barbeau's meaning, then exploits this disjunction to colonize Barbeau's language with

new meanings of Abel's own. Even if this process parallels Barbeau's erasure of the

indigenous cultures he studied—in that Barbeau, though privy to the same depictions

(*Darstellung*) of indigenous culture in the totem poles as indigenous people themselves,

imposed catastrophically different ideas about what they stood for (*Vertretung*)—Abel

seems to concede that subsequent misrepresentations may be the only viable means of

resistance. Realistically, one could surmise that history is composed of such erasures all

the way down.

Multiple aspects of Abel's strategy are emphasized in the book's first sequence, "a

feud over this pole." While the passage acting as the sequence's source features

Barbeau's descriptive summary of an incident in the recent history of two west coast

North American indigenous clans (Abel, *Place* 5), Abel's erasures repeatedly redeploy

the word "his"—which throughout the passage refers to various historical individuals—to

implicate Barbeau himself, generating meanings that are not only new to Barbeau's text,

but also formally impossible from within Barbeau's first-person perspective. This

reversal is accomplished in several ways throughout the sequence, each of which

indicates different aspects of Abel's attitude and technique. On one page toward the end

of the sequence, for example, Abel recomposes 14 instances of the word "his" using

letters spread across various words in Barbeau's text (*Place* 13), emphasizing both his

redirection of the original text's object and his willingness to almost totally dismember its

means of making sense. On another page (quoted below), Abel joins the phrase "by

Marius Barbeau," which in Barbeau's text appears in a footnote, to phrases from the

quotation's body text (*Place* 7). By cobbling the original text's two fonts into a jarring

through line, Abel demonstrates his aim to evoke a voice strictly differentiated from

Barbeau's, even as he also exposes the gap between Barbeau's voice and the silenced

voices of the indigenous cultures the ethnographer sought to represent.

What counts as voice, however, is repeatedly complicated by Abel's means of

articulating his own, and in this sense *The Place of Scraps* also cuts through the debate

over authorship that has dominated the critical reception of appropriation-based writing

over the last several decades. Rather than emphasizing internal qualities such as meaning

or style, Abel depicts his, Barbeau's, and others' voices as concrete effects defined by

their iteration across space and time. In the following pages from "a feud over this pole,"

Barbeau and Abel speak in the same words and, roughly, about the same topic (Barbeau's

interaction with the material culture of the Eagles and Wolves clans), yet they are

differentiated by their means of production and contexts of reception. More specifically,

perhaps, each is individuated by its refusal to assimilate the means and contexts of the

other. The sequence begins as follows:

or Sakau'wan

and

Sispagut
the river
the country

the canyon

allied

by Marius Barbeau

[…]

his

new totems

his determination

his
Eagles and   Wolves

[…]

an account
or
summary

was to be
carve   d

from Alaska
(Abel, *Place* 7-11)

Following these are two more pages. The first repeats and stresses the possessive "his,"

indicating (in Abel's voice) Barbeau, while the second includes a single, two-line

fragment: "In summary / , his" (Abel, *Place* 15).

Probably the most readily available means of entering this text is to regard it as a

commentary on Barbeau's work as it is represented by the quoted passages, specifically

criticizing the means by which Barbeau's depiction (*Darstellung*) of the indigenous

histories cited in the sequence's source text surreptitiously constitutes a violent act of

homogenization (a perverse "alli[ance]" of river, country, and canyon) and control

(*Vertretung*). This interpretation is reinforced throughout the *Place of Scraps* and

especially by its discussion of the Sakau'wan totem pole, which acts as one of the book's

thematic centres. Several of the quoted sections of Barbeua's *Totem Poles* narrate the

Sakau'wan pole's removal from British Columbia's Nass River valley and installation in

the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and Abel's treatment of these sections reveals the

conspiracy of aesthetic idealization and concrete dispossession of indigenous culture by

which Barbeau's anthropological colonialism was effected. Ventriloquizing Barbeau's

consideration of the pole's original site, whose apparent precariousness was such that it

could "[a]t any point […] topple into the river," Abel writes, "Anyone with a sound mind

and a respectable education would understand that this monument must be preserved, and

that I am bound by duty to be the one to preserve it" (*Place* 43).[16] Yet for Abel, it is

precisely Barbeau's faith in the ideal, objective, and eternal value of the pole that ensures

his strategy of "preservation" is at the same time the engine of profound cultural erasure.

Abel cements this argument in the sequence titled "the pole transported to

Toronto," in whose source text Barbeau describes how the Sakau'wan pole, after being

floated downriver to Prince Rupert, had to be cut into three pieces to accommodate the

lengths of the railway cars that would transport it across the country (Abel, *Place* 19). In

the first of his erasures of the passage, Abel extracts the phrase "feel / no difference / in

the water / or / Toronto," aptly summarizing the bizarre lapse by which Barbeau, in his

frenzy to preserve the physical object of the pole, failed to consider that its cultural

function might also depend on its spatial and institutional context (*Place* 21). The third

erasure, however, fiercely exposes the material extent of Barbeau's cognitive dissonance

writ large, as Abel's text reads, "remove / thousands of / Indians / successfully / without

feeling a tremor" (*Place* 25). Abel thus draws out the inevitable conclusions of Barbeau's

approach to culture: to believe that there is "no difference" between the presentations of

indigeneity in different contexts—as if indigenous cultures could be plucked, as if in

quotation marks, from their territories and dropped into museums—is in a sense to

annihilate indigeneity at its core. Moreover, when the possibility of this removal is

reframed as an imperative—that is, when removal and replacement are understood as the

---

[16] Although Abel presents this passage in a manner similar to that of his direct quotations from *Totem Poles*, the words are not Barbeau's. The plausibility of the scene Abel imagines, however, is well supported by Barbeau's own pronouncements: in *Totem Poles*, Barbeau does suggest that in 1927 the pole "leaned precariously on two props over the bank of the river" (32), and that "[i]t stands now [in 1950] in a better place for its preservation. Lost to all notice in the northern jungle, it would soon have tumbled to the ground and decayed, whereas it is now on display for everyone to see and may last forever" (33).

sole guarantors of a culture's survival against the forces of time and nature—those with the capacity to remove assume a de facto control over the culture they seek to protect.

Despite these deep criticisms, Abel's emphasis on the method behind the content of his statements (as well as, in a distinct but related sense, Barbeau's) complicates the text's commentary on Barbeau's appropriation of indigenous culture, both broadening and nuancing its scope in relation to more simplistic critiques of colonialism. As the authors of the *CanLit Guides* entry on the book suggest, *The Place of Scraps* challenges the assumption that indigenous engagements with settler culture are corruptions of indigeneity; for Abel, anti-colonial resistance is not primarily about affirming the supposedly authentic cultures erased by colonialism, but instead begins in a world already deeply impregnated with colonial logics. These logics, in turn, must provide the tools for critique as much as they constitute some of anti-colonial criticism's primary targets.

In the first place, Abel depicts himself as a subject who, though far from collaborating in the settler-colonial project, has deeply internalized some of the central tenets of Barbeau's colonialist mindset. This depiction remains ambiguous in the sequence titled "R.O.M.," as Abel writes that "the poet," after realizing he cannot remember his encounter with the Sakau'wan pole during an earlier visit to Toronto, "is surprised and ashamed that the pole that was removed from his ancestral village has also been excavated from his own memories" (*Place* 63). At this point, it is unclear whether the poet's shame indicates his culpability for forgetting to attend to his past or his victimization by a settler-colonial culture that, by radically decontextualizing the artifact,

has also destroyed its cultural significance to its rightful inheritors. In a later sequence,
however, which occurs after he has visited Vancouver and been given a wooden spoon
carved by his father, the poet identifies the extent of his own replication of Barbeau's
idealism. Here, Abel writes,

26.06.2008

The poet travels back to Edmonton and reassesses the validity of his
knowledge of the past. The poet rotates the wooden spoon in his hands and
becomes distracted by its history: unblemished, unused. He contemplates
putting the spoon to use, but finding himself unable to do so, places the
wooden spoon on the shelf. Without warning, the poet becomes acutely
aware of his own projected purpose for the wooden spoon, an object
designed for the uncontrollable nakedness of spectacle. The poet takes an
inventory of all of the similar pieces he has witnessed: the totem pole in
the mall, the emblems on the manhole covers, the endless carvings for sale
in Water Street storefronts, and the wooden spoon on the shelf. (*Place*
105)

Here, it becomes apparent that Abel (to the extent that he can be identified with "the
poet," which is strongly suggested by the labelling of this and other passages as dated
journal entries), as much as Barbeau, is responsible for "project[ing]" an idealized
purpose onto the objects that are meant to signify his cultural heritage, in essence
annihilating this deeper signification by exposing it to "the uncontrollable nakedness of
spectacle." Perhaps even more interesting, however, is that the poet's response to this

realization is not immediate repudiation and reform, but methodical evaluation and taking account, following which there is no clear sign of a better way.

In this sense, the appearance of an intact, unfetishized, original indigenous culture in *The Place of Scraps* is neither impossible nor simply possible, since it is destined to withdraw behind an indefinite sequence of misrepresentations. Although the wooden spoon carved by the poet's father provides an undeniably concrete link to the poet's ancestry, it is by no means a faithful depiction of that ancestry's supposed origins. As Abel affirms in the above passage and elsewhere in *The Place of Scraps*, the spoon is "designed" to be seen as authentically indigenous without being used in any authentic way; it is, in fact, merely a trace of the poet's father's day job "carv[ing] totem poles to sell to tourists, paint[ing] on canvases for the storefronts of Water Street" (139). Thus, the poet's representation of the spoon is perverse not because it distorts the spoon's authentic or original purpose within indigenous culture, but because it seeks to project authenticity onto an object that is already an idealized and distorted representation of that culture, whose actual authenticity is thus deferred. Yet the situation is further complicated by the fact that this inauthentic portrayal of the poet's cultural ancestry is simultaneously an authentic trace of his father's life. Just as the spoon cannot represent its supposed cultural origins without erasing the actual conditions of its production, the poet cannot adequately represent his ancestral culture's history without erasing his father's.

Most poignantly, this pattern of indefinite regress also defines the concrete lineage between Abel and Barbeau. The key is in the source text for "a feud over this pole," which contains Barbeau's summary of the rivalries between indigenous clans, carvers,

and chiefs out of which emerged the material culture of the Nass River valley, and specifically the Sakau'wan pole itself. In the section of *Totem Poles* from which Abel's quotation is drawn, Barbeau recounts that the pole was commissioned by the allied Wolves and Eagles clans, who were known as recent migrants to the Nass River valley, as a means of demonstrating their superiority over the Killer-Whales, the area's original inhabitants (29-31). Though the feud between the two groups was bitter, being marked at one point by bloodshed and betrayal, the successful erection of the pole ended it by cementing the Wolves' and Eagles' predominance in the territory (Barbeau 29-31). By drawing attention to the fact that the Sakau'wan pole is the product of political conflict rather than pure cultural expression, Abel's selection discredits Barbeau's attempt to frame the pole as a benign representative of the indigenous culture of the region. Like the poet's treatment of the wooden spoon, Barbeau's treatment of the pole is violent not because of its damage to any supposed authenticity of the pole, but because it projects authenticity onto an object that in fact represents just one side of a territorial dispute between two clans. As a result of this projection, Barbeau misrecognizes and misrepresents the commonality between those clans (if one exists at all) as an undifferentiated indigenous identity. Similarly, Abel's poet's contemplation of the wooden spoon does not grant him clear insight into his past, but instead secludes him in his confusion, as Abel admits that "[h]e cannot define the tradition that his father functions within" (*Place* 139). In both cases, the broken chain between depiction (*Darstellung*) and proxy (*Vertretung*), and the ad hoc and deeply biased interpretive processes that result, transform the risk of misrepresentation into the interpreter's

authority to remake the world before him in his own image.

This pattern demonstrates two important characteristics of representation: first, that representation is ubiquitous and ubiquitously partial, in that one cannot reach an authentic, original identity that could be conveyed without bias; second, that representation, insofar as it traverses the distance between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* via misrepresentation or erasure, is an inherently violent act for which individual agents can be held responsible. This second characteristic draws the parallel by which all the representative acts in and around *The Place of Scraps*—the carving of the Sakau'wan totem pole, Barbeau's "carv[ing]" a summary or account (Abel, *Place* 11) from Alaska, the poet's father's carving of the wooden spoon, and Abel's carving his own "summary" (Abel, *Place* 15) of Barbeau's actions from the text of Barbeau's book—become visible as forms of carving in a deeper sense, as authorial acts of creation through destruction or erasure. If settler colonialism's "extermination of Indigenous presence is poesis, the making of the (New) World," as Max Karpinski notes, then Abel's writing, too, is a form of "creation via erasure," even as it emerges "against the grain of the twin thrust of salvage ethnography." Karpinski's characterization of *The Place of Scraps* as a "regenerative reclamation" should be understood more in the sense of transformation and renewal than of recovery. In accordance with the ubiquitous partiality of representation, Abel orients his erasures primarily toward a reckoning with his ancestry, not a return to the past. If there is no original "being" to bring forth and heal, then the purpose of an erasure—regardless of its source text's complicity with the most heinous acts of genocide—can only be to carve out something new again.

Rather than recovering alternative narratives from within Barbeau's meaning, Abel remakes Barbeau's materials into an alternative voice that both condemns Barbeau's legacy and asserts Abel's own individual being in the world. In this regard, Abel follows Barbeau's example closely, emerging as an inheritor of colonial history even as he succeeds at exposing and undermining the violence of colonialism's assumptions. He thus makes explicit the direct antagonism between source text and erasure that Philip (though in an important sense strategically) pushes to the point of near invisibility: all erasurists, while invoking the forces of resistance already contained in their sources' textual worlds, also make manifest radically distinct worldviews for which they are uniquely responsible. For Abel, the elisions between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* in Barbeau's settler-colonial project do not indicate the continuity of his language with his historical impact so much as they expose the finitude of his authorship, singling it out so that its contribution to the historical record can be excised and rewritten. In other words, the vulnerability of Barbeau's text insofar as it erases indigenous culture—or, in terms both literal and Derridean, its subsequent erasability as a text—is for Abel not to be explored but exploited, not to open up the political unconscious of *Totem Poles* but to replace it with an explicit counter-narrative. Even as Barbeau's displacement of indigeneity necessitates Abel's entrance (as well as his ancestry's re-entrance) as a distinct inhabitant of the North American territory, the fact that Abel must assert his own voice to reclaim what Barbeau took implies that justice will not be served merely by recovering and attending to lost truths, although such a mission is ironically shared by both Philip and Barbeau. By foregrounding the responsibility of individual voices over the systemic violence of

language, Abel instead concedes that appropriation, even for the anti-colonialist, is a way of life in the shadow of colonialism, and that the wholeness of "being" is a distraction not worth fighting for in the concrete world.

* * *

While both Philip and Abel treat historical facticity as a fundamental condition of authorship, their means of excavating historical texts also motivate them to navigate history along profoundly different trajectories. As critics including Austen and Khan have stressed, *Zong!* is at heart a work of mourning: its central concern is to delve into the injustices of the past, and in such a way that the potential for present action is reduced to the aporetic awareness that, in the shadow of that past, a fully nonviolent form of remembrance is impossible. Abel's erasures, meanwhile, are increasingly oriented toward activating history in the present and future of its survivors, with little heed given to the moral or ethical difficulties of what Austen calls "secondary witnessing," or attempting to imagine oneself into the experience of historical subjects with whom one cannot fully identify.

Abel's tactic has generated unprecedented results both culturally and literarily. This is especially true of his 2016 collection, *Injun*, which remixes and erases an archive of nearly 100 late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American western novels and

short story collections (now freely available in the public domain) into often ambiguous yet hauntingly beautiful depictions of the past, present, and future lives of North American indigenous peoples. However, Abel's previous book-length project, *Un/inhabited*, which takes a more strictly appropriation-based approach to the same source texts, may best express the realist philosophy that underlies his work. As both Tracy Stefanucci and Kathleen Ritter note, Abel uses his source texts' public domain status to frame them as a "no man's land" (Stefanucci iii),[17] subverting their authors' intended meanings and imposing his own. It can be suggested, as Stefanucci does,[18] that the strong parallel between Abel's tactics and those of the European settlers of North America motivates a re-examination of settler-colonial history in much the same way that Philip's "fragmentation and mutilation" of the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* can be understood as a recreation of European slave owners' treatment of Africans. This argument is complicated, however, by Abel's constant emphasis on subverting the distinction between representative texts and concrete acts. As Ritter puts it, "the question *Un/inhabited* poses is a political one: Can a reader inhabit a text the way one inhabits land?" (xi). To the extent that this question can be answered in the affirmative, it is legitimate to view Abel's work not as a means of healing or even raising awareness of the atrocities of colonization themselves, but as an explicit deployment of the power of concrete texts to re-colonize the material culture of his peoples' colonizers.

---

[17] This phrase invokes the concept of *terra nullius*, which European settlers employed to claim ownership of much of the land once occupied by North American indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 46).

[18] Stefanucci writes that "Abel's choice to construct his work from 'found text'—meaning it was not written by the author, but was stolen, borrowed or taken from the public domain—prompts a reconsideration of the land 'found' by pioneers" (iv).

In the "Cartography" section of *Un/inhabited*, this picture—and its distinction

from that of Philip's *Zong!*—is even clearer. While much of Abel's work downplays its

metaphorical impulses in order to manipulate the concrete traces of others',

"Cartography," which redraws maps of the North American landmass by juxtaposing

appropriated text and white space, highlights a central metaphorical assertion that is

uniquely Abel's: that the territories of the Earth are determined by and as language. Far

from being neutral or indisputable, this truth and its consequences—as Stefanucci puts it,

"that something does not exist until we perceive it, often until we put language to it,

making language the ultimate grounds for colonization in any sense of the word" (iii)—

underlie Abel's strong preference to write as a means of inhabiting, which in turn

excludes more idealistic strategies of recovery such as Philip's. In *Zong!*, erasure suggests

a means of recovering truths that cannot be spoken, either because they belong to lost

languages or, in some cases, to no language at all; when Philip characterizes this task as a

mission to "exaqua" (her proposed aquatic counterpart to "exhume") the sunken voices of

the Atlantic and history, the very nonexistence of the word "exaqua" indicates the

interminability of its hauntological approach to justice (*Zong!* 201). Yet for Abel,

erasure's continual exhumation and re-presentation of the peoples and cultures of the

North American landmass indicates that the use of textual intervention to pursue justice

bottoms out at the identity of language and land. As a result, Abel's reassertion of

indigenous identity and challenge to colonialist logic downplays the recovery of his

peoples' lost language (he only ever portrays non-English words as remnants of

Barbeau's reports) in order to capitalize on the contemporary power of English.

Both in themselves and between the notions of erasure poetry they are helping to establish, *Zong!* and *The Place of Scraps* are permeated by double/crossings. Yet one must gravely misunderstand erasure to believe this diminishes their success as political literatures. Although erasure's force depends on the possibility of argument in an abstract sense—as well as the spectral binaries of complete and partial, progress and regress, and right and wrong that accompany it—it does not wholly assert an argumentative position in the sense of attempting to reinforce the consistency and univocity of a particular representation of truth. In other words, a work of erasure operates neither against its source text nor against a "Romantic" tradition of creativity; rather, it takes up and reverses these and other positions in a plurality of asymmetrical relationships, extending or thickening their concrete inhabitation of space and time. By explicitly double/crossing language's potential to assert a univocal meaning, erasure draws attention to its author's responsibility not for a precise intention, but for the concrete, multidimensional reality of disseminated text. Authorial responsibility is thus partial, fraught, and indefinitely interpretable, but without being reducible to an intertextual multiplicity in which both authorship and power disappear. One may always act as though it "ma[kes] no difference" (Derrida, *Margins* 3) whether an erasure's source text is a venerable classic or a prop for the most horrific forms of oppression; after all, in the context of some arguments (and some anthologies), either may be taken up "in the service of experimental writing" (Dworkin and Goldsmith 484). Yet there will always be a concrete difference at some other dimension of interpretation, as tangible as the difference between the "e" of *différence* and the "a" of *différance*. Amidst the tangle of incomplete trajectories pursued

by a work of erasure, some will nonetheless be pursued further than others. Philip's *Zong!* and Abel's *The Place of Scraps* demonstrate that the concrete effects of these trajectories may be far from benign, in addition to being inherently irreducible and unpredictable. In some cases, such as those of the imperialist and colonialist ideologies that have determined the material reality of human life since modernity, they may be nearly impossible to contain.

Conclusion: (At Least) Two Erasures

Erasure's double/crossing thickens textual meaning wherever it appears, but only insofar as it also foregrounds individual agents' responsibilities for the interpretive trajectories this thickening makes possible. As a result, erasure not only motivates relationships between concrete texts, but also threads texts together with their possible and actual readings, and with the intentions of their authors and erasurists. In *The Question of Being*, for example, Martin Heidegger's "~~Being~~" crosses the traditional line between intentional ontological thought and the historical facticity of philosophical writing, thus allowing him to overcome the subordination of Being to identity without claiming to present Being as difference directly. Yet Jacques Derrida's repetitions and elaborations of Heidegger's writing under erasure go much further in demonstrating its implications for both the structure of writing and the history of philosophy. On one hand, Derrida shows that voice, thought, and intention are irreducibly "spaced out" (*espacé*) across concrete writings. On the other hand, the singular force of intention and expression is partially retained, even under erasure, as the author's responsibility for a text's "power of *communication*" (Derrida, *Limited* 21)—that is, its capacity to convey particular meanings and to suggest particular interpretations (however fallible) of its author's intentions. Motivated by Derrida's attention to the materiality of writing, post-war literary experimentalists such as John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and William Burroughs attempted to use textual erasure to undo the conventional dominance of the author figure in questions of literary meaning; rather than eliminating authorship, however, their legacy

served to nuance future erasurists' understandings of what authorship could accomplish. In this vein, Tom Phillips's *A Humument* combined the recognition of authorial responsibility with the method of composing by erasure to develop a plurality of asymmetrical relationships between authors, readers, language, and even narrative elements such as characters and themes. By freeing erasure from early experimentalists' commitment to Barthes's "death of the Author," Phillips's method (especially in conjunction with Ronald Johnson's *Radi os*) thus seeded the astounding range of aesthetic, political, and ethical concerns represented by contemporary erasure poetry.

While double/crossing and the textual thickness it engenders underlie all instances of textual erasure, their enduring reliance on an external agent's responsibility for meaning ensures that erasure by itself does not explain or delimit the texts it produces. This is why I propose that erasure poetry should not be considered a genre or movement identifiable by its use of consistent tropes or themes; rather, like writing and language in general, erasure should be considered a technique or technology whose potential applications cannot be determined in advance. In the same way that a written language imposes rules of diction and syntax without limiting communication to a closed system, erasure places strict constraints on the process of composition while simultaneously pluralizing the ways in which the resulting text can mean. Moreover, and somewhat surprisingly, erasure intensifies an erasurist's responsibility for the text produced, since, in addition to appearing as a unique act of expression on its own, that text also stands for the overwriting of another author's expression. Nonetheless, all that a general theory of erasure can predict is the inevitability of this pluralization and intensification; their actual

consequences, meanwhile, depend on the concrete characteristics of the texts and contexts involved.

For this reason, I believe there is little to be gained from concluding my study of textual erasure with a purely theoretical summary; instead, I have devoted the following pages to tracing some of my own efforts to thicken the field of erasure writing through the creation of literary works.[1] While I have attempted many erasure projects since first encountering the technique, I believe the two I highlight below—titled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis: A Selection* and *Your Very Own*—are notable in that together they exemplify two of the most profoundly divergent trajectories to which erasure can give rise. In one sense, then, these two works represent two faces of erasure poetry, or two dominant lines of writing under erasure's double/crossing. In another sense, however, the very nature of the double/cross means that it cannot be exhausted by a single binary. As I suggested in my introduction, there are always at least two erasures, but there are frequently more. At the very least, a new writing, or a new reading, may always emerge to shift a given binary into new dimensions of meaning.

Much like John Cage's "Empty Words," which reads more or less as nonsense unless one is privy to the method of its construction, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis: A Selection* suggests two emphatically distinct routes by which to enter into its meaning. From my perspective as the work's author, as well as the perspectives of

---

[1] The accounts that follow are thus based on my personal experiences as an erasurist, and there can be no assurance that they will resonate either with readers or with other writers pursuing similar projects. Considering, however, that erasure-based methods are often both conceptualized and analyzed through an interrogation of the author's individual relationship (or lack thereof) with their work, erasurists' personal experiences of agency, selfhood, and authority seem obviously relevant (though perhaps not authoritative) to the critical discourse surrounding them.

others who are "in the know" regarding my methods and concerns, the work presents itself as a highly systematic experiment in citation, typographical design, and publishing. In this regard, it is much like the complete, appropriation-based artist's books highlighted in Annette Gilbert's anthology, *Reprint*. Yet for a reader encountering the book object without context, initial access to its purpose and meaning (whether superficial, contextual, or historical) is heavily obfuscated. The work appears as a typical codex book of about 140 pages, but printed using type resembling asemic writing[2] or a foreign or invented script (fig. 8). On closer inspection, however, most readers soon realize that the text is printed in a variation of regular modern Latin script, in English, and are able to read it with difficulty. The work is in fact a reprinting of an extensive selection (approximately half of the original book) from the English translation of Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, typeset to mimic the 1977 Hogarth Press edition as precisely as possible. It is difficult to read because, unlike the standard edition, *A Selection* is printed in a typeface that omits parts of each character. While the script therefore appears to be entirely non-Latinate from afar, more attentive readers are able to mentally "fill in" the missing parts of each letter and comprehend the text normally, although slowly and with more frequent mistakes.

---

[2] Asemic writing refers to a genre of artwork between visual art and literary writing. It is made up of hand-drawn lines that, while resembling conventional writing in their form and gesture, do not represent signifying characters in any script or language.
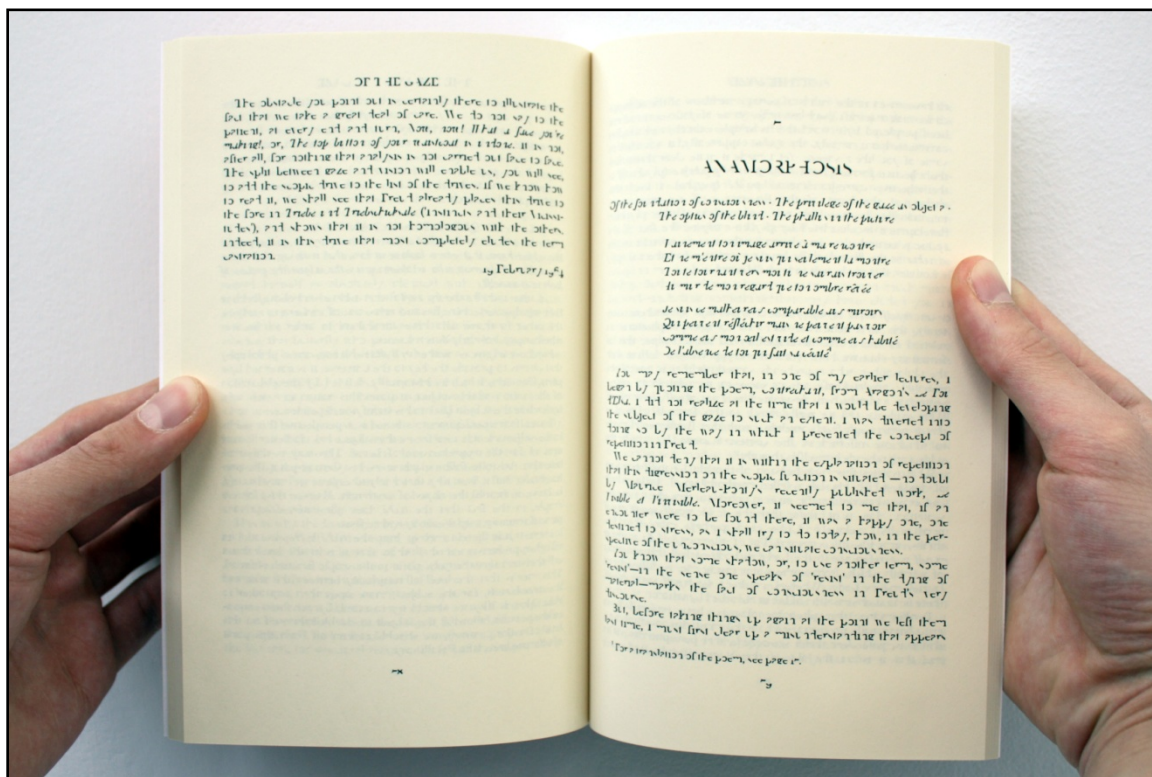
Fig. 8: Nyman, John. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis: A Selection*, **interior.**

As a result of its construction, *A Selection* can be understood as a selection in at least two senses, each of which implicates certain aesthetic, literary, and typographical concerns. In the first place, the direct manipulation of visual text required to create the work's typeface is reminiscent of the material dimension of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs's cut-up method, Tom Phillips's drawing and painting directly onto the pages of *A Human Document*, and Jordan Abel's subtractive collage work. Various aspects of Abel's practice inform *A Selection*'s conceit: for example, Abel's visually obscuring entire fields of text in *Un/inhabited*'s "Extracted" section parallels *A Selection*'s full-page

treatments, while parts of *Injun* include words and syllables that are extensively

fragmented or even turned upside-down, taxing the reader's concentration and optical

reading abilities in a manner similar to that of *A Selection*'s typeface. The result is that *A*

Selection emphasizes the manifestation of language as a visual phenomenon, especially

insofar as it can bring about irregularities and errors that challenge the notion of a perfect

or definitive text.

Yet where Abel's material interventions are usually intuitive,[3] and where Cage's

were generated by abstract mathematical procedures, my work also "selects" from its

source text according to standards of editorial abridgement and recontextualization that

are neither arbitrary nor typically creative. In his "Editing Paradise (Lost)," Logan Esdale

makes the surprising, though persuasive, argument that Ronald Johnson's erasure of

Paradise Lost should be grouped in the same technical tradition as Richard Bentley's

eighteenth-century scholarly edition, which is notorious for the creative liberties Bentley

took in editing John Milton's classic; in a sense, this connection between literary erasure

and scholarly editing is key to my referring to *A Selection* as a literary or artistic work at

all. As the book's title page shows (fig. 9), the publication history of *The Four*

Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis is already marked by a plurality of

contributors—including Jacques-Alain Miller, who generated the text of the book based

on notes from Lacan's eleventh seminar, and Alan Sheridan, who translated Miller's

---

[3] At the end of *Injun*, in a short paragraph titled "Process," Abel recounts, "Sometimes I would cut up a page into three- to five-word clusters. Sometimes I would cut up a page without looking. Sometimes I would rearrange the pieces until something sounded right. Sometimes I would just write down how the pieces fell together."

French text into English—and my insertion of the subtitle "A Selection,"[4] in standard typeface, into this list is intended to represent my own efforts as part of this editorial chain. Like Bentley's *Paradise Lost*, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* already exemplifies the blurring of boundaries between creation and revision; though he approved the manuscript, Lacan never produced formal texts of his seminars himself, and Miller's reconstruction includes at least some features not attributable to Lacan's personal composition (such as, most prominently, the book's title, which was not originally Lacan's [Miller 7]). Like much of Cage and Jackson Mac Low's writing, my drawing attention to the plurality of individuals responsible for *A Selection*'s content serves to decentre the single figure of the author in explorations of the work's meaning. However, while Cage and Mac Low used chance operations in an attempt to eliminate authorship altogether, my focus on a hierarchical representation of kinds and categories of reader-contributors diffuses the attribution of responsibility for *A Selection* without denying its existence.

---

[4] Both the subtitle and the method of *A Selection* also reference Bruce Fink's translation *Écrits: A Selection*, which is mentioned in a prominent note beginning "By the same author" in the front matter of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (and thus also of my work). *Écrits: A Selection*, the first English translation of Lacan's *Écrits*, contains only some of the essays included in the original book.

THE INTERNATIONAL PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL LIBRARY
EDITED BY M. MASUD R. KHAN
No. 106

THE
FOUR FUNDAMENTAL
CONCEPTS OF
PSYCHO-ANALYSIS

A SELECTION

by
JACQUES LACAN

Edited by
JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER

Translated from the French by
ALAN SHERIDAN

LONDON
THE HOGARTH PRESS
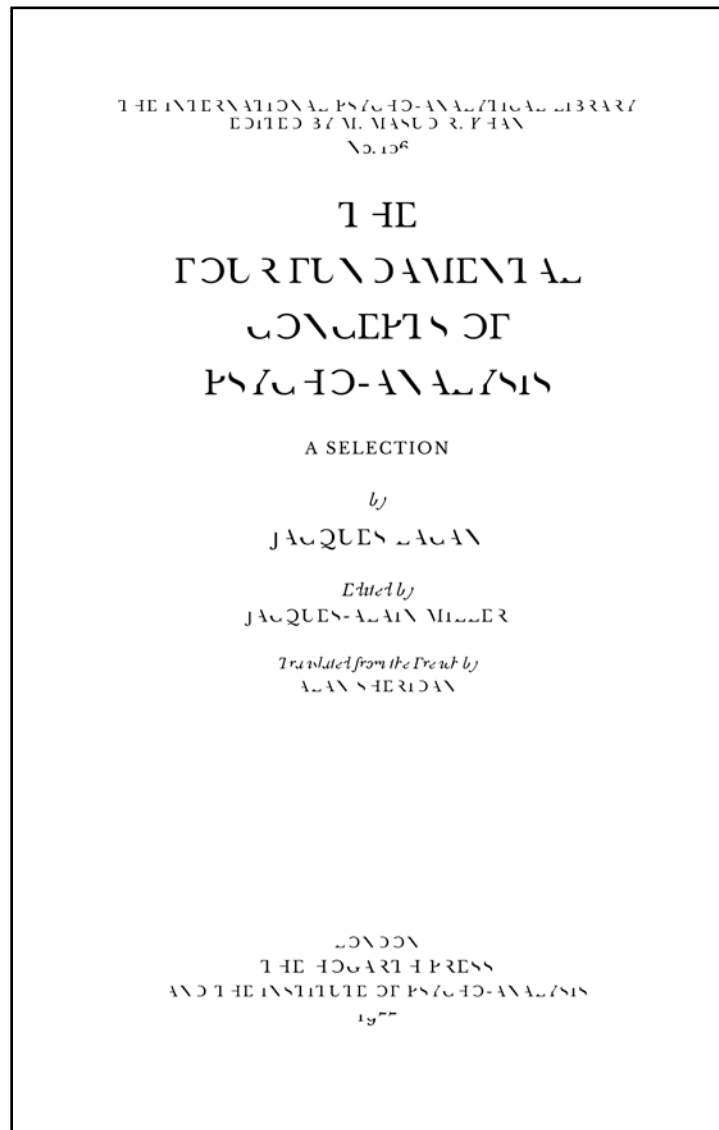AND THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS
1977

Fig. 9: Nyman, John. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis: A Selection*, **title page.**

Ultimately, *A Selection* maintains the importance of asymmetrical, authority-driven structures of signification throughout its conceptualization and constraint. Even as the work's unique typeface exposes writing's vulnerability to effacement and

disappearance in general, the fact that it continues to invite the viewer to read it—and, hence, continues to present itself formally as a text—prevents that vulnerability from determining the text's final condition. It is because of this appeal to the "reassuring and stable authority" of printed type especially that, as Peter Schwenger writes in a forthcoming publication, *A Selection* "tries to pass itself off as asemic writing" yet "fails not because of its weakness but because of its authority" (*Asemic*). Although the work's font encourages misreadings, increasing the chance that readers will unconsciously "modify [the] text to suit their vision of what it could be" (Esdale 25), the systematic nature of the text's production and the prestige of its source serve to definitively mark these misreadings as errors; thus, readers are not invited to invent their own meanings so much as they are confronted with their inability to decipher the correct ones. In this regard, *A Selection* also exhibits an ironic fidelity to its source text, since Lacan's writing is known to be among the most difficult to read (i.e., to comprehend) of any modern thinker's. My reprinting thus replicates, though in a different hermeneutic field, the mythical portrayal of Lacan as an inscrutable master whose insights remain thoroughly inaccessible to the average reader.

Largely because *A Selection*'s method is so systematic and predictable, I feel that I have a considerable degree of control over the text. This is striking because it contrasts sharply with the experiences of other erasurists and writers of appropriation-based literature, many of whom stress the excision of an "identifiable self" from their processes of writing (King), or, like Kenneth Goldsmith, praise the way in which appropriating others' works allows them to effectively "become a machine" ("Being"), in that they

type, format, and print, but do not "write" words of their own. While the process I used to produce *A Selection* was certainly mechanical, I do not believe that my placing myself at the margins of the book's production and publication histories eviscerates my responsibility for what I have accomplished. Rather, my expression of agency via the work, even if it does not dominate the work's ultimate form, to me appears very clear: on any given page of *A Selection*, I am responsible for no more and no less than the typeface. Whether my choice of typeface means nothing (as might be the case for someone hearing the book read aloud) or changes everything, I have a strictly delimited responsibility for the consequences of my experiment.

My experience working on *Your Very Own* has been very much the opposite: although this second project is methodologically much looser, allowing me significant leeway in deciding what to include in the finished document, I feel that my authority and intentions are far more compromised in this text than they are in *A Selection*. While *Your Very Own*, in other words, is more obviously "my" work, I feel far more lost within its construction and connotations than I do with *A Selection*'s comparatively autonomous textuality.

For its part, *Your Very Own*'s source text, Jay Leibold (author) and Don Hedin's (illustrator) children's novel *Choose Your Own Adventure 43: Grand Canyon Odyssey*, is built around its own presentation of the relationship between individual responsibility and a certain form of textual polyvocality. Like all books in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, *Grand Canyon Odyssey*'s narrative is spread out over a series of branching paths, which readers explore over multiple reading sessions by making different choices (most

pages conclude by listing two options for where the reader can turn next) about how to react to the events of each scene. Over the course of the book, the reader's quest down the Colorado River to recover a rancher's lost horses may lead to hidden villages, magical caverns, expedition camps from various historical time periods, or even alternate dimensions, with outcomes ranging from recovering the horses to death. To drive the point home, the story's protagonist is referred to in the second person, and a page titled "WARNING!!!" at the beginning of the book states that "[t]he adventures you have are the results of your choices. *You* are responsible because *you* choose!" (Leibold and Hedin vii). Overall, then, *Grand Canyon Odyssey*'s means of constructing its reader's agency is extremely didactic: it is imperative that the reader take responsibility for the story that emerges, but always and only because the unfolding of that story is governed by a highly restricted set of limitations and assumptions.[5]

On one level, *Your Very Own* sets out to mobilize the complex series of asymmetrical relationships that constitute its text (such as those between author and reader, source text and erasure, and erasurist and protagonist, just to name a few) in order to flip the original novel's idealistic picture of responsibility on its head. Most superficially, it does this by transforming—and thus reflecting on—*Grand Canyon Odyssey*'s ubiquitous technical conceit. At first, *Your Very Own* appears to be more restrictive than Leibold's story, since it excises any explicit instructions to the reader to

---

[5] In this regard, Ronald Johnson's relationship with the source text of his erasure, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, parallels my relationship with *Grand Canyon Odyssey*. As I discussed in chapter 5, Johnson's method takes up the similarly didactic freedom offered by Milton's God—for whom humans were created free, but within a world whose details are intricately planned and controlled by divine forces—and transforms it into something that hovers between a fulfillment of God's imperative and a rebellion against the outer limits of his strictures.

work through the book's pages out of order; in its current form,[6] the erasure is a series of

12 two-page spreads, each containing an erased text page and an erased image, arranged

to be read as a typical (though relatively short) codex book. However, several elements of

Your Very Own suggest that a particularly adventurous reader may benefit from flipping

through the collection's pages out of order: besides the fact that it is divided into two non-

sequential and indeterminately related sections, each section's relatively vague narrative

is just non-linear enough to allow it to be resequenced without generating gaps or

inconsistencies. One could therefore be said to have more freedom in reading *Your Very*

Own than *Grand Canyon Odyssey*—that is, as long as the reader is willing to take

responsibility for inventing a reading path not explicitly suggested by the book object.

But this variability also extends to my own engagement with *Grand Canyon Odyssey* as

Your Very Own's erasurist, especially insofar as my status encompasses that of a writer

and a reader at once. While the possible outcomes of my erasure method are technically

restricted to the words, letters, and other marks contained in the composition's source

text, there is still a huge variety of means by which I can navigate and select from any

given page; in light of the possibility of "reading" *Grand Canyon Odyssey* as an erasurist,

then, the "responsibility" imparted by Leibold's relatively few options in the original

book seems all but meaningless.

    Beyond this technical approach, however, the freedom I sought to exercise by

engaging with *Grand Canyon Odyssey* amounts to much more than the freedom to

---

[6] I consider *Your Very Own* to be an incomplete work at the time of this writing, although its conceit, its
general structure, and much of its core content are finished and stable.

"choose my own adventure," as Leibold intended. Rather, I hoped that erasure might provide me with the tools to mount an in-depth analysis, disassembly, and reconstruction of the deeper ideological framework of Leibold and Hedin's stories. One of the most notable aspects of the book is the fact that, while its use of the second person indicates that the reader is the story's protagonist, the protagonist is represented in Hedin's illustrations as a thin, blonde, able-bodied Caucasian boy. Implicitly, then, the drawings serve to establish an ideal standard for the type of individual who would be the subject of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series's "responsibility." Moreover, *Grand Canyon Odyssey*'s secondary character, a Navajo girl named Delia, exemplifies the stereotype of a gendered and racialized sidekick: while she is not always present for the protagonist's adventures, she consistently provides support for his efforts and on several occasions saves his life, often using skills and knowledge explicitly linked to her otherness (the book's introduction of Delia on page 1 describes her as "a Navajo Indian who knows the secrets of the deserts and canyons of the Southwest" [Leibold and Hedin]). She rarely takes the lead herself, and when she does, her exploits are described in minimal detail. While I overlooked the implications of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series's hegemonic representations of gender and race when I first read the books as a child, encountering *Grand Canyon Odyssey* as an adult motivated me to question both these portrayals and my own internalization of their underlying ideology. As a result, *Your Very Own* attempts not only to expose and dismantle the stories and structures of *Grand Canyon Odyssey*, but also to trace the extent of my own ideological assumptions insofar as they are intertwined with Leibold's and Hedin's.

Combined with my understanding of erasure as a technique of fragmentation and extraction, my efforts to reveal what Leibold and Hedin implicitly communicate about their characters led to my separating Delia and the book's protagonist ("you") into two distinct and unrelated narratives. This split was also driven by the book's paucity of illustrations of Delia, which I planned to erase along with selections of *Grand Canyon Odyssey*'s text; because every illustration of Delia in the book also includes the protagonist, I decided that, to focus on Delia as an independent character, I would create two erasures of each original drawing—one featuring only Delia, and one featuring only "you." The result not only demonstrates the plurality of interpretive trajectories that erasure can uncover within any text to which it is applied, but also (especially in the two-page spreads shown in figs. 10 and 11) helps draw out a subtle, though significant, asymmetry that drives Leibold's narrative: while Delia is regularly pressed to respond to obstacles and correct others' misjudgements, and is rarely recognized for her efforts, the protagonist is repeatedly congratulated for taking basic actions to move his story forward. The latter pattern of being presented with options and then acting in a way that constitutes an affirmative intervention for oneself and others—which is, of course, also the pattern of Leibold's original narrative—is a recurrent motif throughout the "you" section of *Your Very Own*.
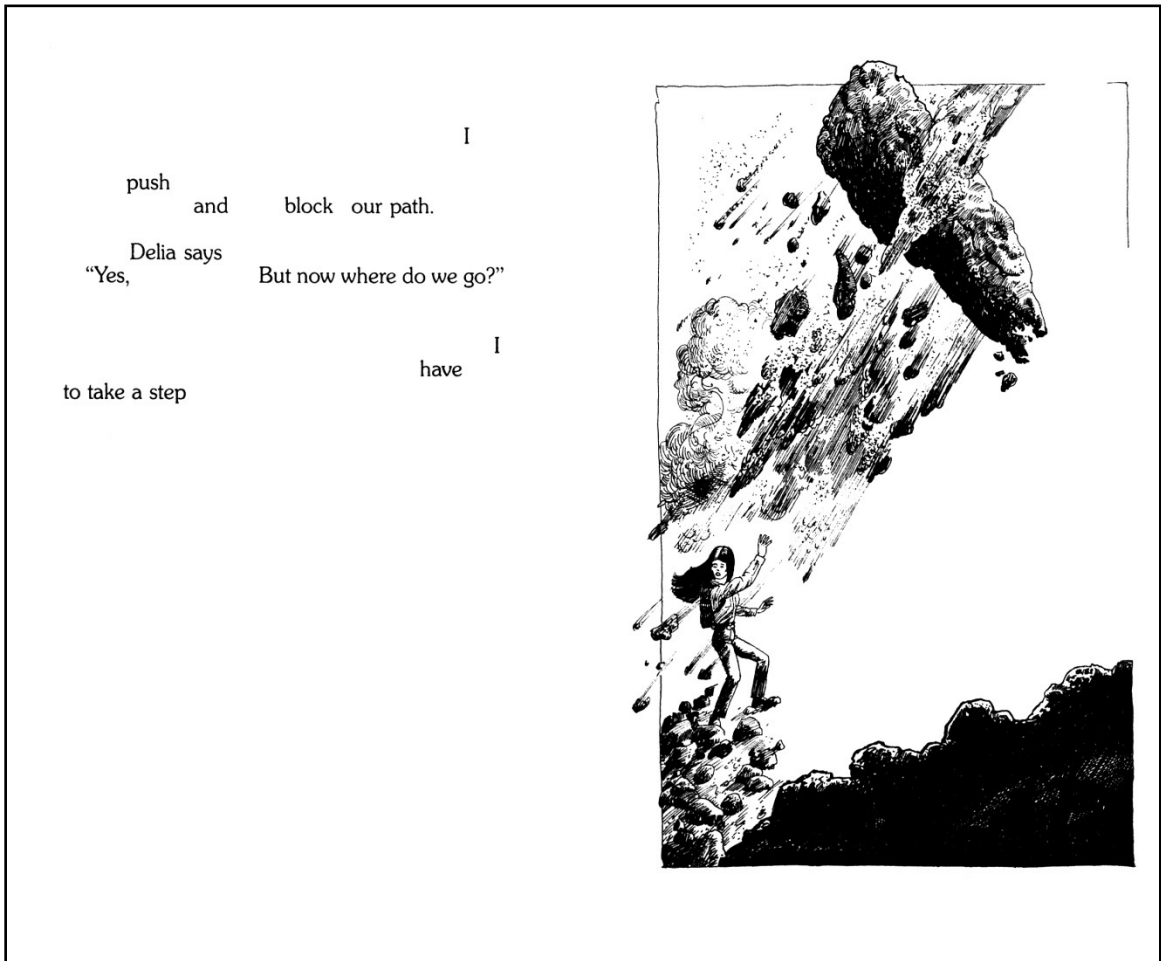
Fig. 10: Nyman, John. *Your Very Own*, from "Delia and I" (1).
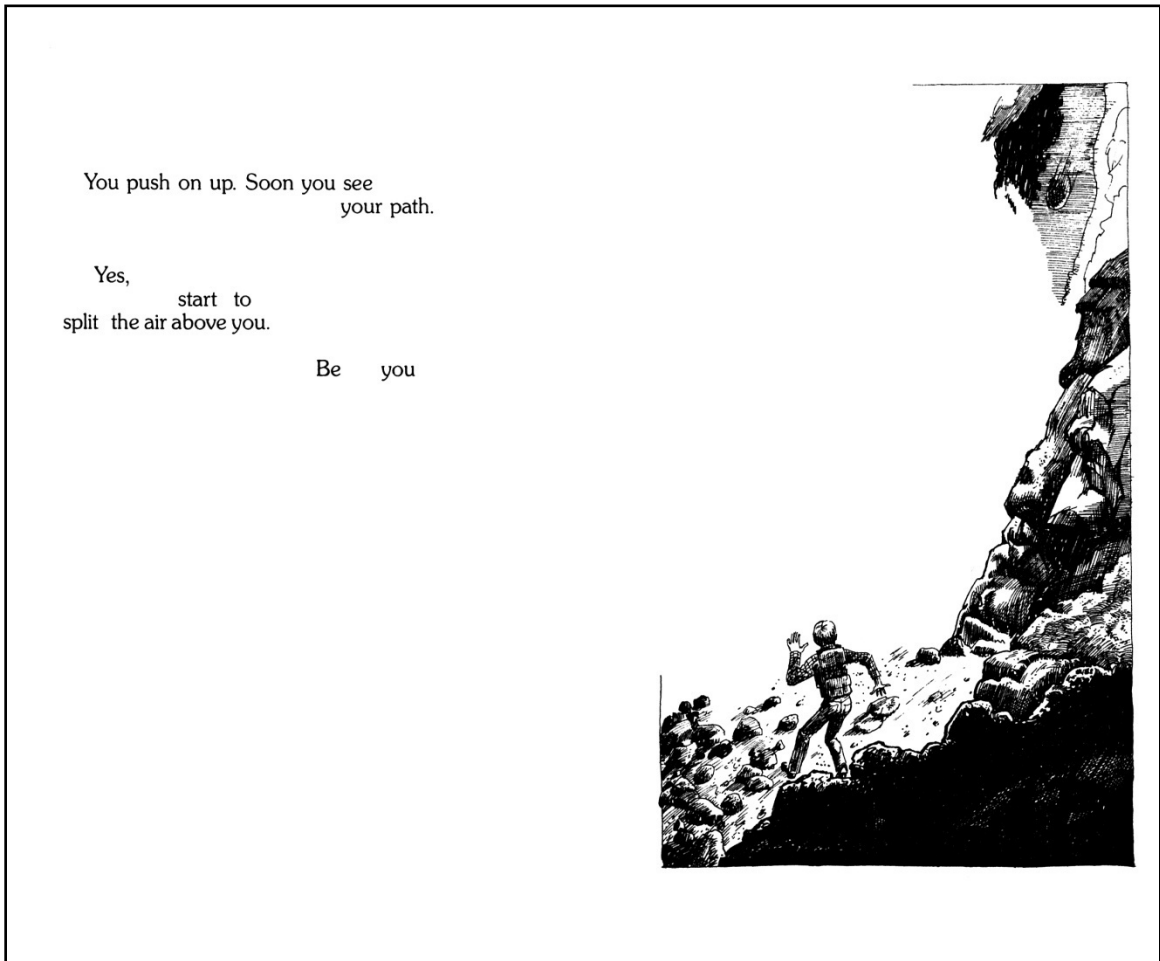
Fig. 11: Nyman, John. *Your Very Own*, from "you."

The pages devoted to "you" in *Your Very Own* are thus relatively straightforward: they reflect largely the same style and themes as *Grand Canyon Odyssey*, but abstract Leibold and Hedin's portrayal of the book's protagonist into an allegorical *Bildungsroman*. The section that highlights Delia's character, titled "Delia and I," is much more fractured and multidimensional. Most notably, "Delia and I" introduces a first-person perspective not used in *Grand Canyon Odyssey*, and while the reader is given more or less direct access to "you" through traces of Leibold's impersonal narrator, *Your*

Very Own's depiction of Delia is always filtered through the new first-person voice.

I imagine the first-person voice in "Delia and I" as belonging to a white, adult male in an intimate relationship with Delia, but what is most clear throughout the section is that, while he is familiar with Delia, he demonstrates practically no genuine understanding of her inner thoughts or motivations. As in the two-page spread shown in fig. 12, the first-person narrator identifies Delia based on her external appearance and actions in the world, but is puzzled, surprised, and even intimidated by the notion of her inner self. From one perspective, this voice could be thought of as a dramatization of Leibold or Hedin, since it replicates the casual objectification and instrumentalization inherent to their portrayal of Delia as a two-dimensional character in *Grand Canyon Odyssey*. From another perspective, the first-person voice could be seen as an entirely new character added as a result of the process of erasure, much like Phillips's Toge. Finally, and also like Toge, the voice could be understood as an embodiment of the book's erasurist—in this case, me. Overall, these interpretations suggest that the first-person voice in "Delia and I" helps to stage the identity-in-difference of multiple contributors to *Your Very Own*'s ultimate form, much like page 44 of Phillips's *A Humument* (which features the painted text "Was Her" alongside an "X" composed of blank spaces from W. H. Mallock's novel).[7] Unlike Phillips's page, however, *Your Very Own*'s "I" (whoever he is) does not assert himself against an abstract institution or blank canvas (like Phillips's brick wall), but instead enacts his authority over a named individual, Delia, whom he can explicitly identify and surveil. In this sense, the

---

[7] See fig. 5 in chapter 4.

convolution and confusion of identities in "Delia and I" illustrates a disconcerting facet of Delia's situation: while the central force behind the misrecognition and misrepresentation of her story is an intimate part of Delia's life, his responsibility is also obscured by his systemic interchangeability with a variety of voices and actors.
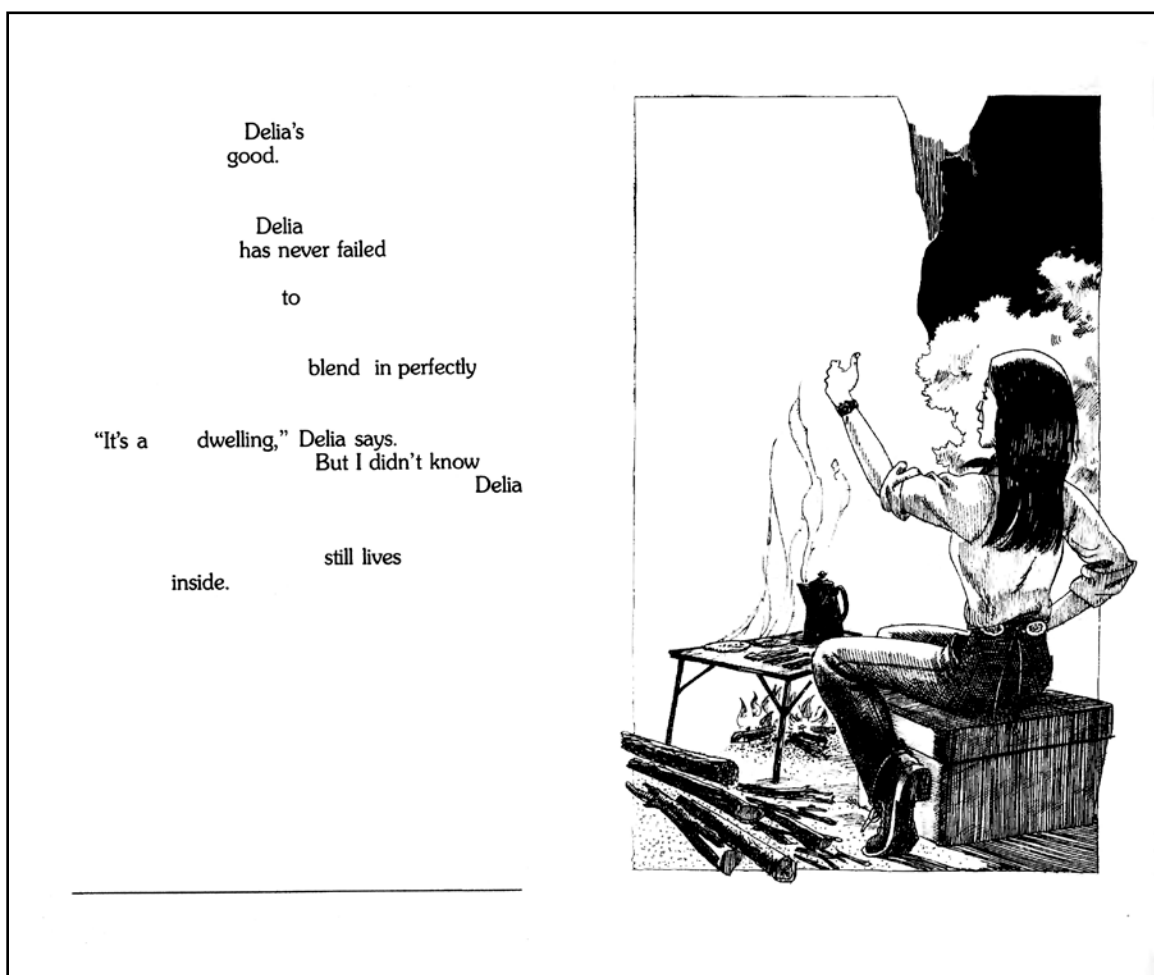

Fig. 12: Nyman, John. *Your Very Own*, from "Delia and I" (2).

Because I am personally interchangeable with the "I" in "Delia and I," the depiction of Delia in *Your Very Own* does not constitute a purely objective observation or commentary on *Grand Canyon Odyssey*; while my portrayal is inspired by Leibold and Hedin's stereotyping, my own authorial decisions—for example, to position Delia in the company of a quasi-predatory "I," or even to extract and examine her character (in a sense making her race and gender hypervisible) in the first place—are also implicated in the erasure's failure to represent her on her own terms. Similarly, I am not fully sure whether my rewriting of Leibold and Hedin's second-person protagonist reflects my ironic distance from his simplistic portrayal of responsibility or my internalization of the individualistic ideology he stands for, either of which could be used to explain my endeavour to appropriate and manipulate their text. What is important about these observations, however, is what they suggest about erasure more generally: as with *A Selection*, my personal sense of authorial control and agency over *Your Very Own* as a complete work is not correlated with the extent to which my decisions are reflected in its literal text—that is, the words and images that are included on, or omitted from, each page. In other words, my lack of direct input into the manifest content of *A Selection* does not compromise or confound my understanding of my responsibility for my role in the project, and the inverse is true for *Your Very Own*. In the latter case, I have exercised direct control over how each page was erased and compiled, yet I have little definitive sense of what I am responsible for communicating through my decisions.

Overall, this eventuality points to one of the conclusions that has reappeared throughout my dissertation: the meaning of an erasure cannot be restricted to a single

textual dimension, but inevitably extends through a thicker series of contexts. While

erasure does have a significant role in shaping the pages on which it appears—

specifically in that it doubles the erased text's meaningful elements, drawing the reader's

attention to both legible writing and concretely manifest omissions—the way in which it

collaborates asymmetrically with its source means that readers' impressions of the source

text, the original author's intentions and attitudes, and the erasurist's conceptualization of

their own intervention all act as further reference points in interpretations of the erasure's

meaning. This is why the combinations of words and blank spaces that make up Mac

Low's "biblical poems" do not conclusively eliminate authorship from literary meaning;

at the margins, the spectre of non-authorship produced by erasure relies on the enduring

presence of the author and his theory of "non-egoic" literature. In Heidegger's and

Derrida's erasures of "Being," "is," and "thing," the words in question are indeed

presented as simultaneously comprehensible and inadequate; however, it is at least as

important that they also offer evidence of both a *paleonymic* "power of *communication*"

(Derrida, *Limited* 21) and a deep suspicion regarding the transparency of that

communication on the parts of Heidegger and Derrida themselves. While the importance

of asymmetrical collaborations between authors is carried through the work of Phillips,

Johnson, and more contemporary erasurists, it is taken to an extreme in Philip's *Zong!*

and Abel's *The Place of Scraps*, whose interventions are nearly meaningless unless the

deeply asymmetrical relationships between their authors and their source texts are taken

into account. Finally, the circulation of meaning through multiple dimensions of

textuality underwrites the contrast between *A Selection* and *Your Very Own*. In *Your Very*

Own, responsibility is fraught not because the narrative portrayed in the erasure is ambiguous, but because my own motivations for composing that narrative, comparing it with Leibold and Hedin's, and reprising Leibold and Hedin's in the process are difficult to nail down. On the other hand, while *A Selection*'s literal manifestation presents countless opportunities for misinterpretation, my responsibility as its erasurist is solidified by the careful, even obsessive depiction of my relationships with the author, editor, and translator of the original text.

If "writing" in the Romantic tradition refers to the singular irruption of an expression, whereby a mute world is matched with a text that combines transcendental thought and human language into a singular event, then writing under erasure is not writing as such. Instead, I would call erasure a *technique of meta-writing*, where both of this phrase's key words are significant. First, erasure is a means of *meta-writing* because it cannot assume the existence of a world without or separate from writing. Rather, erasure is inherently a way of acting within a world of pre-existing texts; instead of creating new meanings *ex nihilo*, it pluralizes or thickens meaning by overwriting, doubling, crossing, and crossing out. From the erasurist's perspective, to erase is to perform the alchemy of conventional expressive writing in reverse; rather than braiding the diverse phenomena of the physical world into the unity of a poetic line, erasure poets work to cut the tangled fabric of intertextuality into new and vital patterns. Nonetheless, I also call erasure a *technique* because it only effects a degree of meta-writing, not meta-writing as such. On the one hand, the enormous range of intertextualities that permeate literary history demonstrate that erasure is not the only way for writing to engage with the

universe of pre-existing texts. On the other hand, even if all writing is in some sense meta-writing (in that it always appears in the shadow of a linguistic and literary tradition), this does not mean that all writing is by default writing under erasure, at least not to the same degree. All writing is inherently susceptible to erasure, but insofar as erasure is a technique, it can always be applied or reapplied to make a text more meta-textual than it already is. Wherever erasure "takes place" (even where it is only the erasure of an erasure), it both doubles a text within itself and extends it beyond itself, pluralizing and thickening its meanings.

Finally, I also refer to erasure as a technique to guard against its being defined as a literary genre or movement. One of the reasons behind erasure's growing prominence in recent years has been the emergence of scholarship focused on describing its characteristics, history, and canon according to these or other unifying categories,[8] and I admit that this critical attention has been one of my primary motivations for pursuing my study. However, while identifying erasure poetry in these terms may be useful for popularizing the technique, I fear it will stifle the critical discourse surrounding it. To impose expectations of how an erasure will mean is tantamount to overlooking the most powerful and mysterious aspects of erasure's double/cross. For this reason, I also believe it is short-sighted to restrict erasure to literature, let alone to the relatively narrow field of modern experimental literature. Against this trend, I hope to have shown in my earlier chapters that Heidegger's and Derrida's erasures are relevant to both philosophical

---

[8] Some prominent examples include Travis McDonald's "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics" and Annette Gilbert's inclusion of erasure in *Reprint*'s detailed classification of appropriation literature (67-68).

writing and writing in general in ways that are still poorly understood.

But erasure also appears, seemingly more and more frequently, in advertising and promotional text, brand names and logos, interpersonal communication, and the "blackout poetry" of Instagram and other social media platforms.[9] My goal in this study is not to suggest that these forms are inherently literary, or that they should be read as literature. Rather, I believe erasure should be understood as a technical aspect of writing—more like a typeface or form of punctuation than a genre, method, or tradition— with the potential to contribute to any application of writing without thereby defining it. Ultimately, it is this understanding, not the delimitation of generic types and conventions pertaining to erasure poetry, that will ensure the most diverse and impactful future for what is known as erasure poetry today.

---

[9] See note 5 of my introduction.

Bibliography

Abel, Jordan. *Injun*. Talonbooks, 2016.

---. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

---. *Un/inhabited*. Project Space P and Talonbooks, 2014.

Anderson, Nicole. *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure*. Continuum, 2012.

Austen, Veronica J. "*Zong!*'s 'Should We?': Questioning the Ethical Representation of
    Trauma." *ESC*, vol. 37, no. 3-4, 2011, pp. 61-81.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford UP, 1962.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Dialectic of Duration*. Translated by Mary McAllester Jones,
    Clinamen, 2000.

---. *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of
    Objective Knowledge*. Translated by Mary McAllester Jones, Clinamen, 2002.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Heteroglossia in the novel." *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory
    Reader*, by Simon Dentith, Routledge, 1995, pp. 195-224.

Barbeau, Marius. *Totem Poles*, vol. 1. Department of Resources and Development
    (Canada), 1950.

Barker, Chris. *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. SAGE, 2004.

Barrow, Samuel. "In Paradisum Amissam Summi Poetae Johannis Miltoni." *Paradise
    Lost*, by John Milton, edited by Barbara K. Lewalski, Blackwell, 2007, pp. 5-7.

Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath, Harper Collins, 1977.

Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1. Zone,

1988.

Bearn, Gordon C. F. "Differentiating Derrida and Deleuze." *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2000, pp. 441-65.

de Beistegui, Miguel. *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology*. Indiana UP, 2004.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken, 2007, pp. 253-64.

Bennington, Geoffrey. *Interrupting Derrida*. Routledge, 2000.

Bernet, Rudolf. "On Derrida's 'Introduction' to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*." *Derrida and Deconstruction*, edited by Hugh. J. Silverman, Routledge, 1989, pp. 135-48.

Bervin, Jen. *Nets*. Ugly Duckling Presse, 2004.

Betts, Gregory. "Not against expression." *Jacket2*, 29 Mar. 2013, https://jacket2.org/article/not-against-expression.

---. "Plunderverse: A Cartographic Manifesto." *Poetics.ca*, no. 5, 2005, http://www.ottawater.com/poetics/issue5.html. Accessed 30 Apr. 2018.

---. "Seeing Visual Poetry in Canada as Decolonial Poesis." *Utsanga.it*, Dec. 2017, https://www.utsanga.it/betts-seeing-visual-poetry-canada-as-decolonial-poesis/. Accessed 30 Apr. 2018.

de Biasi, Pierre-Marc. "Qu'est-ce Qu'une Rature?" Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 17-47.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Step Not Beyond*. Translated by Lycette Nelson, State U New York P, 1992.

de Bloois, Joost. "The Last Instance: Deconstruction as General Economy." *Enduring Resistance: Cultural Theory after Derrida*, edited by Sjef Houppermans et al., Rodopi, 2010, pp. 121-38.

Bolton, Michael Sean. *Mosaic of Juxtaposition: William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution*. Rodopi, 2014.

Bruns, Gerald L. "Poethics: John Cage and Stanley Cavell at the Crossroads of Ethical Theory." *John Cage: Composed in America*, edited by Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, U Chicago P, 1994, pp. 206-25.

Budick, Sanford, and Wolfgang Iser. Introduction. *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, edited by Budick and Iser, Columbia UP, 1989, pp. xi-xxi.

Burroughs, William S. Introduction. *Naked Lunch*, by Burroughs, Grove, 1966, pp. xxxvii-xlviii.

---. *Nova Express*. Grove, 1964.

Burroughs, William S., and Brion Gysin. *The Third Mind*. Viking, 1978.

Cage, John. *Anarchy*. Wesleyan UP, 1988.

---. *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78*. Wesleyan UP, 1979.

---. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Wesleyan UP, 1961.

---. *X: Writings '79-'82*. Wesleyan UP, 1983.

The *CanLit Guides* Editorial Team. "Jordan Abel and Ethnographic Erasure." *CanLit Guides*, 5 Nov. 2013, http://canlitguides.ca/canlit-guides-editorial-team/visual-poetry-and-indigenous-settler-issues-shane-rhodes-and-jordan-abel/jordan-abel-

and-ethnographic-erasure/.

Caputo, John D. "The Economy of Signs in Husserl and Derrida: From Uselessness to
Full Employment." *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques
Derrida*, edited by John Sallis, U Chicago P, 1987, pp. 99-113.

---. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*.
Indiana UP, 1987.

Cascardi, Anthony J. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Philosophy*.
Cambridge UP, 2014.

Clark, Timothy. *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice
of Literature*. Cambridge UP, 1992.

Clévenot, Dominique. "Repentirs Iconoclastes Dans la Peinture du Monde Musulman."
Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 63-71.

Clover, Joshua. "The Genealogical Avant-Garde." *Lana Turner Journal*, no. 7, 2015.

Cooney, Brian C. "'Nothing is Left Out': Kenneth Goldsmith's *Sports* and Erasure
Poetry." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2014, pp. 16-33.

Crimp, Douglas. "Appropriating Appropriation." *On the Museum's Ruins*, by Crimp and
Louise Lawlor, MIT P, 1993, pp. 126-37.

Currier, Cora. "How *Guantánamo Diary* Escaped the Black Hole and Got Past the
Censors (Mostly)." *The Intercept*, 31 Jan. 2015,
https://theintercept.com/2015/01/31/guantanamo-diary-escaped-black-hole-got-
past-censors-mostly/. Accessed 30 Apr. 2018.

Davenport, Guy. "An Afterword." *Radi os*, by Ronald Johnson, Flood, 2005, pp. 93-105.

DeKoven, Marianne. *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism*. Princeton UP,

    1991.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton, Columbia UP,

    1994.

---. *Différence et Répétition*. PU France, 1968.

---. "To Have Done With Judgment." *Essays Critical and Clinical*, translated by Daniel

    W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, U Minnesota P, 1997, pp. 126-135.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

    Translated by Brian Massumi, U Minnesota P, 1994.

---. *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, Columbia

    UP, 1994.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and

    Barbara Habberjam. Athlone P, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills, Fordham

    UP, 2008.

---. "Derrida's Response to Jean-Luc Marion." "How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative

    Theology,'" by Jean-Luc Marion, translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky. *God, the Gift,*

    and Postmodernism, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, Indiana

    UP, 1999, pp. 42-47.

---. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, Athlone, 1981.

---. *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*. Translated by John P.

    Leavey, Jr., U Nebraska P, 1978.

---. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills, U Chicago P, 1995.

---. *De la Grammatologie*. Minuit, 1967.

---. *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, John
Hopkins UP, 1997.

---. "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." Translated by Ken Frieden and Elizabeth
Rottenberg. *Psyche*, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Rottenberg, Stanford UP, 2008,
pp. 143-95.

---. "The Law of Genre" Translated by Avital Ronell. *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek
Attridge, Routledge, 1992, pp. 221-52.

---. *Limited Inc*. Translated by Samuel Weber, Northwestern UP, 1988.

---. *Marges de la Philosophie*. Minuit, 1972.

---. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass, Harvester, 1982.

---. *Monolingualism of the Other, or The Prosthesis of Origin*. Translated by Patrick
Mensah, Stanford UP, 1998.

---. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass, U Chicago P, 1981.

---. "Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis." Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin. *Eyes of
the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, Stanford UP, 2004, pp. 113-128.

---. "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism." Translated by Simon Critchley.
Deconstruction and Pragmatism, edited by Chantal Mouffe, Routledge, 1996, pp.
79-90.

---. "*Sauf le nom* (*Post-Scriptum).*" Translated by John P. Leavey, Jr. *On the Name*, edited
by Thomas Dutoit, Stanford UP, 1993, pp. 33-85.

---. *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Translated by David B. Allison, Northwestern UP, 1973.

---. *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*. Translated by Christine Irizarry, Stanford UP, 2005.

---. *The Truth in Painting*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, U Chicago P, 1987.

---. "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)." *Without Alibi*, edited and translated by Peggy Kamuf, Stanford UP, 2002, pp. 71-160.

---. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass, Routledge, 2001.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Little, Brown & Company, 1960.

Dillon, M. C. *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought*. State U New York P, 1995.

Dronsfield, Jonathan. "Between Deleuze and Heidegger There Never Is Any Difference." *French Interpretations of Heidegger: An Exceptional Reception*, edited by David Pettigrew and François Raffoul, State U New York P, 2008, pp. 151-65.

Dürrenmatt, Jacques. "Repentirs et Division." Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 173-78.

Dworkin, Craig. "The Fate of Echo." *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, Northwestern UP, 2011, pp. xxiii-liv.

---. *No Medium*. MIT P, 2013.

---. *Reading the Illegible*. Northwestern UP, 2003.

Dworkin, Craig, and Kenneth Goldsmith, editors. *Against Expression: An Anthology of*

Conceptual Writing. Northwestern UP, 2011.

Epstein, Mikhail. ""   ."" *Common Knowledge*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2010, pp. 367-403.

"erase, v." *OED Online*, Oxford UP, Mar. 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/63898.

 Accessed 30 Apr. 2018.

Esdale, Logan. "Editing Paradise (Lost): Milton, Bentley, and Johnson." *Ronald Johnson:*

 Life and Works, edited by Joel Bettridge and Eric Murphy Selinger, National

 Poetry Foundation, 2008, pp. 249-280.

Fink, Eugen. "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary

 Criticism." *The Phenomenology of Husserl: Selected Critical Readings*, edited

 and translated by R. O. Elveton, Quadrangle, 1970, pp. 73-147.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan

 Sheridan, Vintage, 1995.

---. *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon, 1978.

---. "What Is an Author?" Translated by Josué V. Harari. *Aesthetics, Method, and*

 Epistemology, by Foucault, New P, 1998, pp. 205-222.

Furlani, Andre. "'Yours Be the Speech': Ronald Johnson's Milton and Guy Davenport's

 Basho." *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*, edited by Joel Bettridge and Eric

 Murphy Selinger, National Poetry Foundation, 2008, pp. 73-98.

Gasché, Rodolphe. *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*. Harvard UP, 1994.

---. *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*. Harvard UP, 1986.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic, 1973.

Gilbert, Annette. "Book Pirates: On a New Art of Making Books." *Reprint:*

Appropriation (&) Literature, edited by Gilbert, Lux, 2014, pp. 49-77.

---, editor. *Reprint: Appropriation (&) Literature*. Lux, 2014.

Giotta, Gina Nicole. *Disappeared: Erasure in the Age of Mechanical Writing*.
Dissertation, U Iowa, 2011. UMI, 2012.

Goddard, Michael. "Sonic and Cultural Noise as Production of the New: The Industrial
Music Media Ecology of Throbbing Gristle." *Deleuze, Guattari and the
Production of the New*, edited by Simon O'Sullivan and Stephen Zepke,
Continuum, 2008, pp. 162-72.

Goldberg, Itzhak. "La Rature Dévisagé (d'Arnulf Rainer)." Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 167-71.

Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Being Boring." *Electronic Poetry Center*, Nov. 2014,
http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html. Accessed
30 Apr. 2018.

---. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. Columbia UP, 2011.

Gregson v. Gilbert. *Zong!*, by M. NourbeSe Philip, Wesleyan UP, 2008, pp. 210-211.

Grésillon, Almuth. "Raturer, Rater, Rayer, Éradiquer, Radier, Irradier." Rougé, *Ratures*,
pp. 48-60.

Hägglund, Martin. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. Stanford UP, 2008.

Hair, Ross. "Derivation or Stealth? Quotation in the Poetry of Robert Duncan and Ronald
Johnson." *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of
Derivation*, edited by Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons, U Iowa P, 2012, pp. 129-
49.

---. *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP, 2011.

Hamilton, Diana. "Style in Quotation Marks." *Amodern*, no. 6, 2016,
http://amodern.net/issues/amodern-6-reading-the-illegible/.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific
Analysis." *Poetics Today*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, pp. 67-90.

---. *Writing Machines*. MIT P, 2002.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, State U New York P,
2010.

---. "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Basic Writings*, revised and expanded ed., edited by
David Farell Krell, Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 343-63.

---. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Translated by
William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Indiana UP, 1995.

---. *Identität und Differenz*. Vittorio Klostermann, 2005.

---. *Identity and Difference*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, Harper & Row, 1969.

---. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Basic Writings*, revised and expanded ed., edited by
David Farell Krell, Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 139-212.

---. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Collins, 1971.

---. *The Question of Being*. Translated by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde, Twayne,
1958.

---. "What is Metaphysics?" *Basic Writings*, revised and expanded ed., edited by David
Farell Krell, Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 89-110.

Ho, Tammy Lai-Ming. "Book-eating Book: Tom Phillips's *A Humument* (1966-)."

Connotations, vol. 25, no. 2, 2015/2016, pp. 288-99.

Holmes, Janet. *The Ms of My Kin*. Shearsman, 2009.

Holzer, Jenny, and Robert Storr. *Jenny Holzer: Redaction Paintings*. Cheim & Read,

    2006.

Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a*

    Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure

    Phenomenology. Translated by F. Kersten, Martinus Nijhoff, 1983.

---. *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1. Translated by J. N. Findlay, Routledge, 1970.

---. "The Origin of Geometry." Translated by David Carr. *Edmund Husserl's Origin of*

    Geometry: An Introduction, by Jacques Derrida, U Nebraska P, 1978, pp. 157-80.

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Play of the Text." *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of*

    Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory, edited by Sanford Budick and Iser,

    Columbia UP, 1989, pp. 325-39.

Jaeger, Peter. *John Cage and Buddhist Ecopoetics*. Bloomsbury, 2013.

Jameson, Fredric. *Representing Capital: A Commentary on Volume One*. Verso, 2011.

Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*, vol. 2. Seuil, 1980.

Johnson, Ronald. *Radi os.* Flood, 2005.

Karpinski, Max. "'Split With the Kind Knife': Salvage Ethnography and Poetics of

    Appropriation in Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*." *Canadian Literature*, no.

    230-231, 2016. *Academic OneFile*. Accessed 4 Jun. 2018.

Kates, Joshua. *Essential History: Jacques Derrida and the Development of*

    Deconstruction. Northwestern UP, 2005.

---. *Fielding Derrida: Philosophy, Literary Criticism, History, and the Work of Deconstruction*. Fordham UP, 2008.

Keenan, Thomas. *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics*. Stanford UP, 1997.

Khan, Almas. "Poetic Justice: Slavery, Law, and the (Anti-)Elegiac Form in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, pp. 5-32.

King, Andrew David. "The Weight of What's Left [Out]: Six Contemporary Erasurists on Their Craft." *Kenyon Review Blog*, 6 Nov. 2012, https://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/11/erasure-collaborative-interview/. Accessed 30 Apr. 2018.

Kirby, Vicki. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*. Duke UP, 2011.

Kleon, Austin. *Newspaper Blackout*. Harper Collins, 2014.

L'Abbé, Sonnet. "Tree, I Invented a New Form of Poem." *Poetry Foundation*, 14 Dec. 2017, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/12/tree-i-invented-a-new-form-of-poem. Accessed 30 Apr. 2018.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Norton, 1981.

Lambert, Gregg. *In Search of a New Image of Thought: Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Expressionism*. U Minnesota P, 2012.

Lefort, Claude. Editor's Preface. *The Prose of the World*, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, edited by Lefort, translated by John O'Neill, Northwestern UP, 1973, pp. xi-xxi.

Leibold, Jay, and Don Hedin. *Choose Your Own Adventure #43: Grand Canyon Odyssey*.
    Bantam, 1985.

Lejeune, Denis. *The Radical Use of Chance in 20th Century Art*. Rodopi, 2012.

Lemaire, Gérard-Georges. "23 Stitches Taken by Gérard-Georges Lemaire and 2 Points
    of Order by Brion Gysin." *The Third Mind*, by William S. Burroughs and Brion
    Gysin, Viking, 1978, pp. 9-24.

Lewis, Andrew. "Martin Dockray and the *Zong*: A Tribute in the Form of a Chronology."
    Journal of Legal History, vol. 28, no. 3, 2007, pp. 357-70.

Lucy, Niall. *A Derrida Dictionary*. Blackwell, 2004.

Lydenberg, Robin. *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs'
    Fiction*. U Illinois P, 1987.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Translated by Georges Van
    Den Abbeele, Manchester UP, 1988.

Ma, Ming-Qian. *Poetry as Re-Reading: American Avant-Garde Poetry and the Poetics of
    Counter-Method*. Northwestern UP, 2008.

Mac Low, Jackson. "Cage's Writings up to the Late 1980s." *Writings through John
    Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art*, edited by David W. Bernstein and Christopher
    Hatch, U Chicago P, 2001, pp. 210-33.

---. *Thing of Beauty: New and Selected Works*. Edited by Anne Tardos, U California P,
    2008.

---. *Words nd Ends from Ez*. Avenue B, 1989.

Macdonald, Travis. "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics." *Jacket*, vol. 38, 2009. *Jacket2*,

http://jacketmagazine.com/38/macdonald-erasure.shtml.

Magnien, Michel. "III, 2, Un: Montaigne, 'Du Repentir.'" Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 115-31.

Malabou, Catherine. "Following Generation." Translated by Simon Porzak, *Qui Parle*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2012, pp. 19-33.

---. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Translated by Sebastian Rand, Fordham UP, 2008.

Mallock, William Hurrell. *A Human Document*. New York, Cassell, 1892. Adamant Media, 2005.

de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. U Minnesota P, 1983.

Marin, Ileana. *The Victorian Aesthetics of Erasure in Fiction and Illustration*. Dissertation, U Washington, 2011. UMI, 2012.

Marion, Jean-Luc. *God Without Being*. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson, U Chicago P, 1991.

---. "How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology.'" Translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky. *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, Indiana UP, 1999, pp. 20-53.

Marrati, Paola. *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger*. Stanford UP, 2005.

Marshall, Brenda. *Teaching the Postmodern*. Routledge, 2013.

Marvell, Andrew. "On Paradise Lost." *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton, edited by Barbara K. Lewalski, Blackwell, 2007, pp. 8-9.

Maynard, James L. "'I find / I found myself / and / nothing / more than that': Textuality, Visuality, and the Production of Subjectivity in Tom Phillips' *A Humument*." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2003, pp. 82-98.

McAllester Jones, Mary. *Gaston Bachelard, Subversive Humanist: Texts and Readings*. U Wisconsin P, 1991.

McCaffery, Steve. "Corrosive Poetics: The Relief Composition of Ronald Johnson's Radi os." *Pretexts*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2002, pp. 121-32.

---. "Transcoherence and Deletion: The Mesostic Writings of John Cage." *Études Anglaises*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2006, pp. 329-40.

McGann, Jerome. *The Textual Condition*. Princeton UP, 1991.

McHale, Brian. "Archaeologies of Knowledge: Hill's Middens, Heaney's Bogs, Schwerner's Tablets." *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1999, pp. 239-62.

---. "Poetry Under Erasure." *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, edited by Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik, Rodopi, 2015, pp. 277-301.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landers, Routledge, 2012.

---. *The Prose of the World*. Edited by Claude Lefort, translated by John O'Neill, Northwestern UP, 1973.

---. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Edited by Claude Lefort, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern UP, 1968.

Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Contexts and Concepts." *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four*

Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, edited by Richard Feldstein et al., State U New York P, 1995, pp. 3-15.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Barbara K. Lewalski, Blackwell, 2007.

Monk, Philip. *Double-Cross: The Hollywood Films of Douglas Gordon*. The Power Plant and Art Gallery of York University, 2003.

Murphy, Timothy S. *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*. U California P, 1997.

"*Naked Lunch* on Trial." *Naked Lunch*, by William S. Burroughs, Grove, 1966, pp. vii-xxxvi.

Nealon, Jeffrey T. "The Discipline of Deconstruction." *PMLA*, vol. 7, no. 5, 1992, pp. 1266-79.

Nolan, Rachel. "'tween aleph and beta I': Crossing lines of difference with M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2015, pp. 20-39.

Norris, Christopher. *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, revised ed. Routledge, 1991.

---. *The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy*. Methuen, 1983.

Nyman, John. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis: A Selection*. Toronto, 2015.

---. *Your Very Own*. Toronto, 2018.

O'Driscoll, Michael J. "Silent Texts and Empty Words: Structure and Intention in the Writings of John Cage." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1997, pp. 616-39.

Oldham, James. "Insurance Litigation Involving the *Zong* and Other British Slave Ships,

1780- 1807.” *The Journal of Legal History*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2007, pp. 299-318.

Orton, Fred. “On ~~Being~~ Bent ‘Blue’ (Second State): An Introduction to Jacques Derrida /
A Footnote on Jasper Johns.” *The Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1989, pp. 35-
46.

Osman, Jena. “Paranomastic Migrations.” *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*, edited by
Joel Bettridge and Eric Murphy Selinger, National Poetry Foundation, 2008, pp.
227-47.

Partington, Gill. “Never mind the Mallocks: missing text in Tom Phillips’s *A Humument*.”
Critical Quarterly, vol. 55, no. 4, 2013, pp. 67-80.

Passeron, René. “Poïétique et Rectification.” Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 189-94.

Pattison, George. *The Late Heidegger*. Routledge, 2000.

Pepper, Ian. “From the ‘Aesthetics of Indifference’ to ‘Negative Aesthetics’: John Cage
and Germany 1958-1972.” *October*, vol. 82, 1997, pp. 30-47.

Perloff, Marjorie. “John Cage as Conceptualist Poet.” *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 77, no.
1-2, pp. 14-33.

---. “Towards a conceptual lyric: from content to context.” *Jacket2*, 28 Jul. 2011,
https://jacket2.org/article/towards-conceptual-lyric.

---. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. U Chicago P, 2010.

---. “Watchman, Spy, and Dead Man: Jasper Johns, Frank O’Hara, John Cage and the
‘Aesthetic of Indifference.’” *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2001, pp. 197-
223.

Pfahl, Courtney A. “‘After the / Unauthor’: Fragmented Author Functions in Tom

Phillips's *A Humument*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2015, pp. 399-419.

---. "Reading [as] The Power-Free Text: Jackson Mac Low's *Words nd Ends from Ez*."

Journal of Modern Literature, vol. 37, no. 4, 2014, pp. 34-53.

Philip, M. NourbeSe. *Zong!* Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Phillips, Tom. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, second revised ed. Thames &

Hudson, 1997.

---. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, fourth ed. Thames & Hudson, 2005.

---. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, fifth ed. Thames & Hudson, 2012.

---. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, final ed. Thames & Hudson, 2017.

---. "Notes on *A Humument*." *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, by Phillips,

second revised ed., Thames & Hudson, 1997.

---. "Notes on *A Humument*." *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, by Phillips, fifth

ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

---. "Notes on *A Humument*." *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, by Phillips, final

ed., Thames & Hudson, 2017.

---. "A Treated Victorian Novel: One Step beyond Illustration." *Imagination on a Long

Rein: English Literature Illustrated*, edited by Joachim Möller, Jonas Verlag,

1988, pp. 181-87.

Priest, Graham. *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. Clarendon, 2002.

Rapaport, Herman. *Heidegger and Derrida: Reflections on Time and Language*. U

Nebraska P, 1989.

Richir, Marc. "Le Travail de l'Artiste à l'Oeuvre: Visible ou Invisible?" Rougé, *Ratures*,

pp. 83-92.

Ritter, Kathleen. "Ctrl-F: Reterritorializing the Canon." *Un/inhabited*, by Jordan Abel,

> Project Space P and Talonbooks, 2014, pp. vii-xix.

Robinson, Edward S. *Shift Linguals: Cut-Up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the*

> *Present*. Rodopi, 2011.

Rougé, Bertrand. "'Ponctuation de Déhiscence' et 'Saincte Couture': La Rature, la Voix,

> et le 'Point d'Ami.'" Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 147-66.

---. "La Rature, Le Repentir, et 'L'Avoir-Eu-Lieu.'" Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 7-14.

---, editor. *Ratures et Repentirs*. PU Pau, 1996.

Sackner, Ruth. "The Avant-Garde Book: Precursor of Concrete and Visual Poetry and the

> Artist's Book." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol. 2, 1986, pp.

> 60-77.

de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Roy Harris,

> Bloomsbury, 2013.

Schwenger, Peter. *Asemic: The Art of Writing*. U Minnesota P, forthcoming.

---. *Fantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning*. Stanford UP, 1999.

Selinger, Eric. "'I Composed the Holes': Reading Ronald Johnson's 'Radi Os.'"

> *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1992, pp. 46-73.

Sharif, Solmaz. "The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure."

> *Evening Will Come*, no. 28, 2013, http://www.thevolta.org/ewc-mainpage28.html.

> Accessed 30 Apr. 2018.

Sholtz, Janae. *The Invention of a People: Heidegger and Deleuze on Art and the*

Political. Edinburgh UP, 2015.

Shultheis Moore, Alexandra. "'Dispossession within the Law': Human Rights and the Ec-
Static Subject in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" *Feminist Foundations*, vol. 28, no.
1, 2016, pp. 166-89.

Siklosi, Kate. "'The absolute / of water': the submarine poetic of M. NourbeSe Philip's
Zong!" *Canadian Literature*, no. 228, 2016. *Academic OneFile*. Accessed 30 Apr.
2018.

Slahi, Mohamedou Ould. *Guantánamo Diary*. Edited by Larry Siems, Little, Brown &
Company, 2015.

Smyth, Adam, et al. "Doctoring Victorian Literature – *A Humument*: An interview with
Tom Phillips." *Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary*, edited
by Partington, Gill, and Smyth, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 112-31.

Spinosa, Dani. "Freely Revised and Edited: Anarchist Authorship in Jackson Mac Low's
The Stein Poems." *ESC*, vol. 41, no. 2-3, 2015, pp. 91-107.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the
Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U
Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271-313.

---. Translator's Preface. *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., by Jacques Derrida, translated
by Spivak, John Hopkins UP, 1997, pp. ix-lxxxvii.

Stalling, Jonathan. "Listen and Relate: Buddhism, Daoism, and Chance in the Poetry and
Poetics of Jackson Mac Low." *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American
Literature into the Twenty-first Century*, edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary

Storhoff, State U New York P, 2011, pp. 89-108.

Stambaugh, Joan. Introduction. *Identity and Difference*, by Martin Heidegger, translated
by Stambaugh, Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 7-18.

Stefanucci, Tracy. Afterword. *Un/inhabited*, by Jordan Abel, Project Space P and
Talonbooks, 2014, pp. i-v.

Stone, Rachel. "The Trump-Era Boom in Erasure Poetry: How a poetic form gained new
political purpose online in 2017." *New Republic*, 23 Oct. 2017,
https://newrepublic.com/article/145396/trump-era-boom-erasure-poetry. Accessed
30 Apr. 2018.

Strizever, Michelle H. *Visible Texture: Artists' Books, 1960-2010*. Dissertation, U
Pennsylvania, 2010. UMI, 2010.

Tenaguillo y Cortazar, Amancio. "La Scène de la Rature: Cervantes, Pinget, Saint
Augustin." Rougé, *Ratures*, pp. 229-42.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling
the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation
Commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015.

Tzara, Tristan. *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*. Translated by Barbara Wright,
Calder, 1977.

Voyce, Stephen. "Reading the Redacted." *Amodern*, no. 6, 2016,
http://amodern.net/issues/amodern-6-reading-the-illegible/. Accessed 30 Apr.
2018.

---. "Toward an Open Source Poetics: Appropriation, Collaboration, and the Commons."

Criticism, vol. 53, no. 3, 2011, pp. 407-38.

Wagner-Lawlor, Jennifer A. "A Portrait of the (Postmodern) Artist: Intertextual

Subjectivity in Tom Phillips's *A Humument*." *Post Identity*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999.

Walvin, James. *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery*. Yale UP, 2011.

Watts, Michael. *The Philosophy of Heidegger*. Acumen, 2011.

Weaver, Andy. "Divining the Derivers: Anarchism and the Practice of Derivative Poetics

in Robert Duncan and John Cage." *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and

the Poetics of Derivation*, edited by Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons, U Iowa P,

2012, pp. 189-209.

Woods, Alan. "A Book of Bits or a Bit of a Book." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 10, no.

3, 1982, pp. 255-62.

Xu, Lynn. "Who Is Doris Cross?" *Poetry Foundation*, 25 Apr. 2014,

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/04/who-is-doris-cross. Accessed

30 Apr. 2018.

Young Hae, Kim, and Michel Constantini. "L'Effleurement et le Retrait." Rougé, *Ratures*,

pp. 73-81.

Appendix A: Permissions

Permission from SODRAC (Canadian sister organization of DACS, copyright representative for Tom Phillips) to reproduce artworks included in Phillips's *A Humument* (various editions) is granted in the letter copied below:

sodrac
society for reproduction
rights of authors
composers and publishers
in Canada

1010–1470 Peel Street
Tower B
Montreal QC H3A 1T1
Tel.: 514 845-3268
Fax: 514 845-3401
sodrac.ca

Montreal, July 20, 2018

Mr. John Nyman
Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism,
University of Western Ontario,
London, ON

RE: Tom Phillips – Permission grant

Dear Mr. Nyman,

We are answering your request to obtain permission to reproduce Tom Phillips artwork in your PhD thesis at University of Western Ontario, titled:

"Double/Cross: Erasure in Theory and Poetry"

Following authorization by the artist and relinquishment of royalties, we are pleased to inform you that permission is granted to reproduce the works listed hereafter in printed copies of your thesis for your personal use and for archival purposes at Western Libraries online database, web pages and search engine, plus Library and Archives Canada and ProQuest/UMI, contingent upon respect of the following conditions:

List of works:

- A Humument Page 6 (first version 1973)
- A Humument Page 6 (second version 2008)
- A Humument Page 44 (second version 1986)
- A Humument Page 46 (second version 1988)
- A Humument Page 105 (second version 1994)
- A Humument Page 133 (first version 1973)
- A Humument Page 133 (second version 2004)

The user agrees to inscribe the detail of the works in the credits section, along with the mandatory copyright byline:

© Tom Phillips, DACS / SODRAC (2018)

The works must be reproduced in their entirety, without any modification. The reproduction of detail or any overprinting of text or any element alien to works is forbidden without prior authorization.

This permission is granted for the above-mentioned use only. Any commercial publication of these works will have to be authorized by SODRAC on behalf of the rightsholder.

We hope everything satisfactory. Please do not hesitate to contact us for any questions.

Best regards,

Jean-Philippe Prince
Visual Arts & Crafts Department
(514) 845-3268 ext. 250
jprince@sodrac.ca

Curriculum Vitae

Name:	John Nyman

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee, USA
2011 Killam Fellowship

York University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2008-2012 B.A.

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
2012-2013 M.A.

Cornell University
Ithaca, New York, USA
2016 School of Criticism and Theory

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2013-2018 Ph.D.

Honours and Awards:

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Doctoral Fellowship
2013-2017

Western University, Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism
Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism Excellence Award
2013-2017

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Joseph-Armand Bombardier Master's Scholarship
2012-2013

McMaster University, School of Graduate Studies
Harry Lyman Hooker Sr. Fellowship
2012-2013

Fulbright Canada
Killam Undergraduate Fellowship
2011

Related Work
Experience: Teaching Assistant
McMaster University
2012-2013

Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2013-2018

Selected Publications:

"The 'Image of Thought' at Dusk: Derridean-Husserlian Responsibility, Destructive Plasticity, and the Manifesto." *Thinking Catherine Malabou: Passionate Detachments*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Slogan, Substance, Dream: keywords for a responsible poetry. Anstruther, 2018.

"The Looks: on Scott Lyall (FrameWork 4/18)." Susan Hobbs Gallery, Apr. 2018, http://data.logograph.com/SusanHobbs/docs/Document/1402/FrameWork%204-18.pdf.

"Lawrence Abu Hamdan's Many Silences: 'Rubber Coated Steel' (2016)." *Peripheral Review*, 14 Aug. 2017, https://peripheralreview.com/2017/08/14/lawrence-abu-hamdans-many-silences-rubber-coated-steel-2016/.

"The Nonconceptual Structure of Repetition: Affect Through Kierkegaard and Freud." *Engaging Affects, Thinking Feelings: Social, Political, and Artistic Practices*, Cambridge Scholars, 2016.

Players. Palimpsest, 2016.

"On 'Fail Porn': A Review of Andy McGuire's *Country Club*." *The Puritan* 33, May 2016, http://puritan-magazine.com/andy-mcguire-country-club-review-john-nyman/.

"The Ashes of Movement: Shane Neilson's *The Fervourist Manifesto*." *Hamilton Arts & Letters* 8.2, Apr. 2016, http://samizdatpress.typepad.com/hal_magazine_issue_eight2/manifesto-of-fervourism-by-shane-neilson-reviewed-by-john-nyman-1.html.