

# ON ERASURE

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"Everything stated or expressed by man is a note in the margin of a completely erased text."

-- Fernando Pessoa

I

I was on a plane and, as often happens, the woman next to me asked me what I did. And it often happens in such circumstances, as we are no longer actually on earth but suspended in the ether above, that a lie takes place. But as I was in no mood for a lie to take place I said, "I do Biblical erasures." And she said, "Bible erasers! You must sell a great many of them!" I didn't know if she meant pink rubber erasers with Biblical quotes stamped on them were a commodity appealing to millions, or, since I claimed to support myself in this manner, I would certainly have to sell millions of them. But as I was still in the truth-telling mode I said, "Actually, I haven't sold a single one." And as the air of the airplane was suddenly warm and oppressive, I struggled to remove my overcoat, and when she reached out to help me I was overcome by this unexpected and tender gesture of assistance and to my great embarrassment, and for reasons having nothing to do with our conversation, I began to cry. And she said, "Don't worry, dear, God works in mysterious ways." We never spoke again, but a month afterwards I dedicated my new book of poems to her, a perfect stranger whose name I don't even know, because she had become by then, in my mind, the perfect stranger.

II

An erasure is the creation of a new text by disappearing the old text that surrounds it. I don't consider the pages to be poems, but I do think of them as poetry, especially in sequence and taken as a whole; when I finish an erasure book I feel I have written a book of poetry without a single poem in it, and that appeals to me.

The books have been called "found poems" but I don't consider them as such. A found poem is a text found in the world, taken out of its worldly context, and labeled a poem. I certainly didn't "find" any of these pages, I made them in my head, just as I do my other work. In the erasures I can only choose words out of all the words on a given page, while writing regularly I can choose from all the words in existence. In that sense, the erasures are like a "form" --I am restricted by certain rules. I have resisted formal poetry my whole life, but at last found a form I can't resist. It is like writing my eyes instead of my hands.

I use white-out, buff-out, blue-out, paper, ink, pencil, gouache, carbon, and marker; sometimes I press postage stamps onto the

page and pull them off--that literally takes the text right off the page! Once, while working on an all-white erasure, I had the sense I was somehow blinding the words--blindfolding the ones I whited-out, and those that were left had to become, I don't know, extra-sensory or something. Then I thought, no, I am bandaging the words, and the ones left were those that seeped out.

I've made forty-five erasure books, and given many to friends as gifts; one has been published, and several sold into private collections. One or two of the books work when read aloud in public, but most of them don't. I can't imagine ever stopping making them, and I hope to be working on one when I die.

You know how when you go into the wilderness you are expected to bring out your trash, leaving nothing behind? I spent the first half of my life leaving words in the world, and will spend the last half taking them out! After all, when they asked Neil Armstrong how he felt about his footsteps being left on the moon, he said he'd like to go back up and erase them.

### III

I call them erasures, but elsewhere they have been referred to as elision books, hyper-editing, cross-outs, and, my least favorite of all these unfavorites, "creative defacement." They are texts made by getting rid of, in a thousand and one ways, surrounding, pre-existing text. Governments call it censorship.

I do not know their origin, but any reasonably intelligent person can imagine a worker in a censorship office, censoring letters mailed from the front line, who, to relieve the tedium of his job, merely thought to himself--"if I wanted to, I could make this letter say some strange things in such a way that it would actually be more interesting than what is being said now."

Or, a government official deleting highly sensitive material in a document, in preparation for releasing the document to another party, or to the public.

And the difference between these two imaginary scenarios is that one end is aesthetic and the other end is political, and these two ends are still the only ends of this act, though postmodernism has obviously conflated both ends in the erasure work of a great many visual artists, such as Jenny Holtzer, to take only one example, an exhibition of whose I recently saw in a museum, and which was comprised of a great many blown-up and censored documents of The United States Government. And though Miss Holtzer has produced work in the past that I am inordinately fond of, it had been a long time since I had seen such a thoroughly boring exhibition.

The artist I want to talk about is Tom Phillips, because the aesthetic ends of erasure, everyone agrees, begin with Tom Phillips and the artifact that was slowly and surprisingly to become his life's work-- an artifact I am loathe to talk about because it must be seen to be believed (by being experienced) but I will do the best I can to speak briefly about this work of art, one I came to myself in the 1980s when reading an issue of Artforum in which prominent artists were asked to name what they considered, privately and personally, the great work of art of the twentieth century, and the writer William Gass named Humument, by Tom Phillips.

In the mid nineteen-sixties, Tom Phillips was inspired by William Burrough's cut-ups, texts the American writer made by cutting up newspaper text and rearranging it. Phillips used British newspapers to the same end, but was soon determined to take the whole thing further. He set a rule for himself: that he would buy the first book he came across that cost three pence. He found, for three pence, an old used copy of a Victorian novel he had never heard of, called A Human Document, by William Hurrell Mallock, printed in 1872, a novel Phillips discovered had been so popular in its day that the edition he purchased was its 7,000th printing.

And so began the collaboration of Mr. Phillips and Mr. Mallock, the original author. Beginning to erase text using ordinary pen and ink, Phillips soon switched to gouache and water-color, and began to paint each page of the 367 page novel, at the same time leaving selected exposed text, so that the treated novel became an illuminated manuscript, often compared to the work of William Blake, and now, I believe, owned by the Tate Gallery in London.

The book was first published in book form (such a funny thing to say) in 1980, and it is a novel-within-a-novel, so to speak, a narrative made out of another narrative, though many of the pages stand alone as poetic or philosophical text. There is a character, Bill Toge, whose name Phillips could only use on those pages where either the word "together" or "altogether" were used, the requisite "toge" being found in either of those words. To quote Phillips speaking of this "feast" of a book: "It is the solution for this artist of the problem of wishing to write poetry while not in the real sense of the word being a poet he gets there by standing on someone else's shoulders."

This quote remains in the present tense because Phillips has never stopped working on the novel, though finishing his first treatment of it long ago; he continues to treat the novel, page after page, never repeating his previous treatments. (Not to mention a complete opera score he made out of the novel.) To this end, of course, he needed more copies of the book, and by 1997 had fifteen copies. He has done 20 variations alone of page 85. The second copy of A Human Document that he bought had been bought in 1902 by a woman who underlined whole passages and added marginalia, an

act he loved and wholly welcomed because he realized that over time, when we underline a passage in a book or add marginalia, we ourselves are "treating" the book we are reading. He soon realized that he was engaged in a great act of deconstruction, to use the byword of those days, and beyond all this, and much more which I am not even bothering to mention, he realized that he was engaged in a paradoxical enactment of Mallarme's famous dictum that "everything in the world exists in order to end up in a book." Even books exist to end up as books.

He also discovered that the original Victorian novel--A Human Document--is mentioned in a novel by Dorothy Richardson. Which is where my life comes in. Perhaps, or maybe, for one can never tell where a thing begins.

Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957) was a novelist who was an intimate friend of H. G. Wells and other avante garde thinkers of the day, all of whom encouraged her to write; she wrote a series of autobiographical novels and became a pioneer of the "stream of consciousness" technique, and Virginia Woolf credited her with inventing "the psychological sentence of the feminine gender." But she was almost completely ignored and forgotten until the feminist heyday of the 1960s and 1970s, when she was championed and rose from obscurity to become the feminist avante garde darling that she, well, always was.

In the early 1980s, at Bennington College, I had a remarkable student named Lisa Conrad, who is now a visual artist living in San Francisco. At some point--I no longer remember when--she sent me the photograph of an installation she had erected on the outskirts of San Francisco. I liked it so much, and was so moved by the text, that I put it in a little plastic frame and hung it on my wall, and though I have moved many, many times since then, it remains to this day on my wall.

I did not realize until writing this essay that the text is an erasure. Years before I myself began doing erasures, I stared at one every day! You see, discovering Tom Phillips did not lead me to erasures. Nor did Lisa's billboard (or did it?), nor did the Vermont College graduating lecture by my remarkable student Natasha D'Schommer, a photographer, who showed us on a screen erased pages that I remember as predominately in a single color, such as a bright scarlet, with only a single word, or at most two, left visible--"Home" say, and/or "Nest." Natasha's work took my breath away--I remember silently weeping in the back of the room--but she was much more of a minimalist than I could, at that time, bear to be--No, I think I only sensed then that this thing, this using pages of one book to make another book--had more possibilities than I had ever dreamt of, and that even though I was not a visual artist like Tom Phillips, I was a poet, someone who was predominately a poet, and could approach the pages of an old book and find there

the possibility of poetic text that traveled outside the margins of conventional poetry, and that this was a place I very much wanted to inhabit, for the single reason it felt like home.

I am not, and never will be, the great artist Tom Phillips is. But I can--and this is possibly the boldest statement I have ever made--find in five minutes poetic text it takes Tom Phillips six months to find.

But my text-finding limit is five minutes. Tom Phillips' is one year.

You see, I don't actually read the books. I don't read the text, unless the book is very, very, very interesting to me, and that has only happened twice in ten years and thirty-nine books. The only way I can describe it is like this: the words rise above the page, by say an eighth of an inch, and hover there in space, singly and unconnected, and they form a kind of field, and from this field I pick my words as if they were flowers.

And so, one day in 1998, I bought, for three dollars, a small soft leather 19th century book, and using an ordinary black pen, began crossing out words.

It's crude, to be sure. I don't care. My first fifteen books are very crude indeed. I learned as I went along, and I am learning still. I took off on my own private path, and I have never looked back. At some point I discovered I had a secret bond with white-out. Perhaps I have lived through too many blizzards. At some point I discovered you can't use graphite unless you use a fixative. I discovered gouache, because Joshua Beckman mentioned he was using it. At some point I began to cut out pictures from other books, and paste them onto the pages of my books, to do collage of text and image. At some point I heard other writers were doing the same thing. I heard Jen Bervin had done Shakespeare's Sonnets--NETS--and someone else Paradise Lost--RADIOS--but I liked my obscure little books; I had no interest in famous works. At some point I discovered someone was doing John Ashbery--at some point I discovered it had become a hip parlor game--no interest, no interest.

At some point--interest--I become involved in an erasure correspondence with my editor, Joshua Beckman. We are doing the entire Flaubert/George Sand correspondence by mail. He's Flaubert, I'm Sand. Four page letters are reduced to two lines:

Light along the river and I walked pretending I was a tide, in thin exaggeration alone. I love being particular. One existence. What a task! A little note from your north wind, adieu.

Without knowing that Phillips redid his own pages--with no knowledge of that at all--I found a second book I had previously

erased and jumped at the chance to do it all over again, to see if I would erase a single page in the same way--no, I didn't, I couldn't. It was, as Phillips said, a feast.

But it doesn't interest everyone. Most people, I have found, are either horrified or bored by it. Visual artists will turn the pages of an erasure book and not read the text; they will only look for visuals--nothing else interests them. I find it amusing. Poets you think would be interested--say my friend Tomaz Salamun, go figure, he tells me to my face he doesn't like it. I love that! I love loving something so much that you simply don't care what other people think.

And most of all, I am chagrined by those who think it is fun and easy and run out and buy a book and then run to me and show me what they've done, seeking my approval--this has happened at Vermont College--or by those who endlessly find little books and send them to me in the hopes I will erase them (unless they are Larry Sutin, god bless and endorse him).

You see, I am not encouraging you to do this because it is to me exactly like art--it is a private journey; we can be inspired and we can be influenced, but the predominant note of any journey must be found in the quiet unfolding of our own time on earth.

That said, I will say this: eight times out of ten, an erasure of a poem, made by the author of that poem, will be better than the original poem. It is sometimes called revision, but of course you cannot actually read the original poem, you can only look at the words.

I will now add, as an addendum to these remarks, the information--quite logical--that erasure is not exclusive to written text. Bill Morrison's film *Decasia* is a film erasure, made entirely by editing decayed film stock--old film from a variety of sources that has decayed throughout time to the point of being "burnt out" or erased--and as such is a complete and unique erasure experience, one you may order through Netflix. But be forewarned--the film will either change your life, or you will not be able to endure it to its end--a litmus test of how you react to erasure. The same might be said of William Balinski's *The Disintegration Loops*, music created when Balinski attempted to transfer old tape loops from analog reel-to-reel tape to digital hard disk. But the tapes were old and they were disintegrating. "The music was dying," says Balinski in his liner notes, but he kept recording, documenting the death of the loops. So sometimes we just stumble upon an act of erasure and recognize its beauty and seek to preserve it--seek to preserve that which has not been preserved; we make compositions out of decompositions.

And who can forget the famous "Erased deKooning" by Robert Rauschenberg--when the savvy young artist (again, working in the heyday of deconstruction) was given a drawing by Wilhem deKooning and took an eraser and erased most of it, and promptly sold it for boodles as a Rauschenberg-cum-deKooning?

And who can forget? And who can forget? I CAN, you may be thinking, because I never knew any of this before, or I CAN, because none of this is of interest to me, or changes my life--so I, I can forget.

And that, my friend, is the art of erasure, as it is enacted in your own life, and all lives: life is much, much more than is necessary, and much, much more than any of us can bear, so we erase it or it erases us, we ourselves are an erasure of everything we have forgotten or don't know or haven't experienced, and on our deathbed, even that limited and erased "whole" becomes further diminished, if you are lucky you will remember the one word water, all others having been erased; if you are lucky you will remember one place or one person, but no one will ever, ever read on their deathbed, the whole text, intact and in order.

First your life is erased, then you are erased. Don't tell me that erasure is beside the point, an artsy fragment of the healthy whole. If it is an appropriation, it is an appropriation of every life that has preceded your own, just as those in the future will appropriate yours; they will appropriate your very needs, your desires, your gestures, your questions, and your words.

Or so I believe. And I am glad. What is the alternative? A blank page.

I am all the book remembers of itself.

I will now offer an erasure of this essay.

IV

I call them erasures  
and so began  
because lips never stopped working  
for one can never tell  
an intimate rose  
from the remarkable habit  
of crude time