# Reason Under a Ruined Hat

I remember at school when forced to study passages in my Geography textbook I would often be distracted by the meandering rivers of space that ran between the words. Instead of reading I would spend my time tracing their journeys through the text with the tip of my pencil. I imagine that Tom Phillips probably played the same sort of games, but where for me the preoccupation meant I never learnt anything about geography, I suspect that he might have somehow made a connection between the text ‘river’ and the Amazon or the Mississippi, which the words on the page could, for all I knew, have been describing.

This ability to see how something interesting might be crafted from the mundane while remaining aware of the source material seems key to Tom’s approach to *A Humument*. However drastic visual transformation of each page, the residue of the former story is allowed to bleed through, giving us a clue to the original context as well as the method by which the new work is created.

In a way all writing is collage. The words are out there; you just pick the ones you want and rearrange them on the page to say what you want to say. The difference in *A Humument* is that rather than starting with the generally accepted advantages of a blank page and a full dictionary, Tom Phillips chooses to begin work on a page already occupied by words chosen by someone else. At the very outset each page of W.H. Mallock’s original text must contain the handful of words that will eventually remain once Tom’s selection process has taken place. You’d think these self-imposed limitations might seriously narrow the creative potential, but if fact the exact opposite is true. His unique way of seeing enables him to employ the constraints of the exercise as a liberating force, unearthing and highlighting previously undiscovered and often seemingly non-existent gems from within the original story. The tighter the restrictions, the more inventive he becomes. The results are as liberated and inventive as anything one is ever likely to read.

Even the best of writers rely on tried and tested similes and metaphors: a lick of paint, a piercing scream, a watertight alibi, but *A Humument’s* self-imposed rules force Tom to construct his own. Instead ‘gentle shining children stand beside you…one child bone; the other gravy’ and ‘words in winter [are] cold like the other side of the mother star’. This is writing at its best and owes much to the method by which it is created. How else would you come up with the phrase ‘reason under a ruined hat’?

And it doesn’t stop there. The paintings, whose main purpose seems to be to obscure the unwanted words, also serve a dual purpose as illustrations that support and complement the chosen words, making each page a perfectly balanced a seamless blend of text and image.

*A Humument* is a tour de force on many levels, not least in demonstrating the advantages of a work in progress that is constantly evolving, but is never less than its very best. The goal for the work is for it to eventually replace itself by revisions, thus becoming subject to Theseus’ paradox, which raises the question of whether an object that has had all its component parts replaced remains fundamentally the same. I would contend that it does, since *A Humument* is defined more by its process that its form.

Whatever motive lies behind the constant strivings to exhume and unravel the hidden mysteries of the original text, through his undaunted pursuit Tom Phillips, like some medieval alchemist, seems destined to prove that with sufficient dedicated reworking and polishing it is possible to transmute the base metal of an unremarkable forgotten novel into pure gold.

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