

## Experiments With Text

We can talk all we want about the idea of “story”—and indeed, we should. But regardless of the conceptual shape a story takes, it is through the medium of text that we receive it. It isn't just the words that the text represents which comprise the stories we read and write—the experience of looking at the text on the printed page is part of the story, as well.

Much of James Dickey's novel *Alnilam* is laid out in columns; we're supposed to sort of read all the columns on a given page at the same time, to see what different characters are thinking at the same moments. Tom Phillips' incredible *A Humument* was (and is) created by taking the pages of an obscure Victorian novel called *A Human Document* and artfully blotting out most of the text. The words left behind form a new novel of their own. Here's what the pages look like:



I'm also a big fan of the French “Oulipo” organization, a loose confederation of experimental comic writers who enjoy playing with the conventions of narrative. Oulipian Raymond Queneau wrote a sonnet called “A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems” which consists of ten pages of iambic pentameter, with dotted lines between them, so that, using scissors, you can create a flip-book of nearly infinite permutations. Another Oulipian (I forget who it was) famously wrote a “novel” that consisted of table of contents, foreword, introduction, preamble, index, author's note, footnotes, etc.--with several hundred blank pages where the main text ought to have gone.

Poets, of course, are historically more aware of the appearance of text on the page—textual manipulation is nearly *de rigueur* in that genre. But in fiction, it's considered avant-garde. In any event, your assignment is to try it. Write a few pages that explore the possibilities of text on the page. You may think up your own experiment, or use one of the suggestions below:

- 1) Explore the possibilities of the footnote.
- 2) Use the margins.
- 3) Defy the two-dimensionality of the page.
- 4) Use text as a sculptural element.
- 5) Call attention to the difference between printed text and text on a computer screen.
- 6) Address, in some way, handwriting.
- 7) Incorporate colors other than black into your work.
- 8) Question the idea that a text should be identical every time you read it.
- 9) Borrow the formal arrangement of a kind of text not intended for artistic expression.