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VICTORIAN AESTHETICS OF ERASURE IN FICTION AND ILLUSTRATION

Foreword by Adina CIUGUREANU

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Foreword

Censorship in book publication has always been regarded as the malevolent act of limiting the readers' access to the author's thoughts by cutting out passages, chapters or even banning entire books from publication. On the other hand, self-censorship is defined as the author's personal decision to exercise control over his/her own thoughts, ideas, memories, and mental images. But what should we call the self-imposed act of cutting through one's own text because of a sudden change of idea or because of the word limit requirement in the economy of the book chapter in serial publication? It is obviously a form of censorship, which in most cases is self-imposed, but in many others, it is exercised from the outside. The term generally used for this kind of imposed (self) censorship is 'erasure', or 'cancelation', which encompasses all the meanings that censorship may have, but also creates the premises for an extended analysis of the various versions of the text, of the particular relationship between the text, the printed page, the illustration and the finite product ready to be consumed by the readers.

Ileana Marin's study *Victorian Aesthetics of Erasure in Fiction and Illustration* is an excellent, insightful analysis of the connection between writing, illustrating and erasing in Victorian fiction with a special emphasis on the most revealing of Charlotte Brontë's, George Eliot's, Charles Dickens' and Anthony Trollope's manuscripts and published novels. By engaging in this interdisciplinary approach to the text, as well as in the relationship

cut after his drawings in order to correct the smallest details that betrayed his conception of the characters' features. Looking at the proofs of Millais and Leighton, one appreciates the challenges of condensing pages of narrative text into one image. Their effort to provide another medium for the text oftentimes transformed the illustration into an artwork in its own right, but always in close connection to the text. Millais even took the illustrations for Trollope's text a step further, developing some of the visual motifs into independent narrative paintings.

To read these four Victorian novels, written and published between 1853 and 1868 (by which date Dickens had published four editions of *Great Expectations*), with the passages that were canceled either before the first printed version or between various printed versions, is to unveil their authors' private secrets and desires, their fears and hopes. What these Victorian writers felt compelled to conceal under *x-es* and crossing lines is of great relevance for Victorian aesthetics.

Chapter 1

A Theoretical Approach to Erasure

Theories of Erasure as Writing

Erasure is the negation of writing. This means that writing was already inscribed and, after the writer's self-evaluation, was invalidated; the aftermath of this process of evaluation is erasure. Is erasure, thus, violence against writing after which no more writing is possible? Or is it a rejection whose only scope is to allow more writing to be inscribed? Irrespective of how drastically erasure annihilates writing, erasure is a negation of writing with immediate consequences: either it allows more writing to be inscribed, or it reformats the remnants of previously inscribed writing into a new artifact. In both cases, erasure is a part of the triad of writing – erasing – rewriting.

The triad of writing resembles Hegel's dialectic, according to which abstract categories have the potential to turn themselves into their opposites, and finally to reach the comprehension of their interconnection and transformation. Erasure, as mentioned above, is the opposite of writing, and, thus, the first form of a critical judgment. "Critical" in this context does not mean that erasure, considered as a contradiction, indicates exclusively an error; erasure is in fact a sign of critical thinking

which allows a new writing to be inscribed.¹ The process of writing and erasing can be viewed as a dialectical process (in a Hegelian sense) that leads to the whole in the form of a literary work. Erasures or cancelations are traces left by authorial self-critical analyses, whose purpose was to allow another variant to appear and thus to maintain the dynamic process of writing. The writing after erasure, or the rewriting, is not the equivalent of the Hegelian absolute, or in the terms of textual criticism, it is not a representation of authorial final intentions; it is rather a stage in a continuous process, part of a still larger development.

I argue that erasure is a crucial contributor to the aesthetic value of literature in general, and of Victorian fiction in particular. Major works of literature have been subject to ample revision and some, such as Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, were never finished in spite of many years of work. In the following discussion I will first draw on the theoretical perspectives on the topic of writing provided by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roger Chartier, Randall McLeod, Marta

¹ In *The Hegel Reader*, Stephen Houlgate emphasizes the idea that Hegel "cannot assume in advance that being will have any particular overall structure or that the categories will turn out to be moments of the Absolute, because that would violate the very idea of a thoroughly critical, presupposition less philosophy" (18). According to Houlgate, Hegel conceived the dialectic process of asserting and negating before he reached the idea of the whole in order to make a distinction between two forms of thinking. The first emerges from a preconceived idea of the whole and is defined as abstract understanding; the second is concerned with the immanent world of objects, their relation and development, and is defined as scientific or philosophical.

Werner, and Jerome McGann; I will then address the four situations that compelled Victorian writers and artists to make erasures, focusing in particular on the four novels mentioned above: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, George Eliot's *Romola*, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and Anthony Trollope's *Orley Farm*.

Philosophical Approaches to Writing/Erasing: From Plato to Derrida and Foucault

While writing means physically to inscribe a text onto a surface, erasure is an attempt to clear the formerly inscribed surface, to restore the original blankness, or simply to modify the initial visual image and meaning of the text. Although writing and erasing have been conceived as inseparable, there is no reference to erasure in the myth of writing as related by Plato in *Phaedrus*. In this work, writing is viewed as a debasing activity which replaces active memory and "true wisdom" with a mere semblance. Socrates tells Phaedrus about the meeting between Thamus, the King of Egypt, and Theuth, the wise creator, who invented not only serious sciences such as calculus, geometry, and astronomy, but also entertaining games such as checkers and dice. Theuth presents the King with his most recent invention, writing, as "a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom" (Plato, 274 e); the king's answer is harsh and painful:

'O man full of arts, to one it is given to create things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and profit they have for those that shall employ them. [...] [I]f men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling

things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is not true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows'. (Plato, 275 a)

Ontologically, writing is a transcription of something that otherwise is stored in someone's mind. It is similar to the shadows on the wall of the cavern at which Plato's prisoners in *The Republic* look. Like the shadows, which are deceitful projections of the image of the real thing and consequently unsubstantial and incorporeal, writing itself might be deceitful as it has no consistency or reality in itself. If the reader is incapable of understanding the meaning enciphered in writing and does not have any contact with a superior agency who may offer an explanation about the meaning to which a particular piece of writing might refer, the reader cannot deal directly with the real thing, or the pure ideas.² Stuck with writing, the reader, like the chained prisoners facing the wall of the cavern, is a prisoner in the sensible world. Writing by itself is only a physical, meaningless appearance as its essence is somewhere else.

It was precisely the physical aspect of writing that Socrates argued against. For him, written words are useless since

² According to Plato, the sensible world is a copy of the real world, that of pure ideas. Consequently, writing, as a copy of a thought, has no existence in itself. Writing depends upon the existence of thinking, the real, yet incorporeal, entity that matters.

they remained silent if one asked for clarification regarding the author's intended meaning. Socrates thus anticipated the misfortunes of editors and textual scholars alike, saying:

The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; ... And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parents to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself. (275 e)

In Socrates' view, the written text misleads a reader who is less knowledgeable than the author. Hence, writing is insufficient to deliver the meaning.

According to Plato, knowledge is trapped in the concreteness of the potentially mistreated written text. While he himself wrote down Socrates' utterance, thereby exposing it to misunderstanding, Plato seemed to ignore completely the positive aspect of the text's physicality, that is, the text as document. He did not refer once to his own writing or to his thoughts about writing while in the process of writing about hazardous writing. Nonetheless, the effort of mastering the art of writing is implicitly praised if one realizes that his anti-writing polemic is itself expressed through writing. Erasure makes writing, at least artistic, rhetorical, and legal writing, more valuable since it puts into evidence the striving for the right expression, which is so difficult to achieve. Plato writes:

...one who has nothing to show of more value than the literary works on whose phrases he spends hours, twisting them this way and that, pasting them together and pulling them apart, will rightly, I suggest, be called a poet or speech writer or law writer. (278 e)

Although Plato did not mention the concept of erasure, he did imply it when he referred to the process of creation. "Twisting," "pasting [the words] together," and "pulling them apart," all suggest erasure. Erasure is implicitly connected to literary creation and the search for the expression with the greatest impact. Moreover, the verbs through which Plato inferred erasure allude to pain, as if erasure hurts both the writer and his writing.

Plato's theory opened the way to the view of writing as susceptible to imperfection and therefore erasure as a correcting strategy. After all, erasure is writing. It is the self-regulating aspect of writing which leads, apparently, to a better writing, at least in the eyes of the writer. Writing itself is inherently dialectical: it inscribes itself producing a new object, ideally a good one, while at the same time it needs revision whenever it fails to produce a valuable and desired product. In this sense, only erasure can partially restore the writing's purity, offering again the incentive for writing anew. This is the main idea that Jacques Derrida takes from Plato and readdresses in his works on language and writing.

In his books *Of Grammatology, Speech and Phenomena* and *Writing and Difference*,³ both published in 1967, Derrida

redefines writing, trying not to commit himself to any limiting definitions. For him, writing is both a means of "archivation" or preservation of knowledge as well as a means of continuous erasure or questioning previously accepted premises, theories, and interpretations. In *Of Grammatology*, he established an unconventional, hermetic style meant to increase the ambiguity of his analyses deliberately. These analyses were not supposed to lead to strict categorizations, but rather to fluid and integrative points of view on writing as experience, in Husserl's terms. For example, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida offers a close reading of the "writing lesson" in *Triste Tropiques* (1955) by Claude Lévi-Strauss in order to show how incomplete, ineffective, and incorrect from a semiotic point of view was Western definition of writing represented by Lévi-Strauss. The passage describes the Nambikwara chief imitating the Western writing and using it as leverage in his competition with another tribal chief. For Derrida, Lévi-Strauss' *phonocentric* definition of writing is too narrow because it does not consider the "wavy horizontal lines" or the "dots and zigzags" of the Nambikwara as writing. Inscriptions on stone and soil are also forms of "empirical writing" and as such serve the purpose of communication and "archivation" that supplement the verbal communication. Derrida's "archivation" echoes Plato's concern that writing substitutes for memory, with the difference that writing's potential to store information is neutral, if not positive.

The innovative aspect of Derrida's theory of writing is the presentation of writing as an experience, a "continuum,"

³ I note that in library catalogues the word appears as "Difference", which is the normal English spelling. However, most critics use the

original spelling of the word, with an "a" to draw attention to the fact that they use Derrida's concept.