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ARTÍCULOS / ARTICLES

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## STRIKETHROUGH AND WIPE-OUT: TACTICS FOR EDITING THE PAST\*

### TACHAR Y BORRAR: TÁCTICAS PARA CAMBIAR EL PASADO

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**ABSTRACT:** When editing text by hand, lines may be struck out, in acts of deletion, or rubbed out, in acts of erasure. This article argues that deletion and erasure are opposed, both operationally and in their surface effects. While the strike-through physically crosses words out, ontologically it makes no more contact with the surface on which they are written than does a line inscribed on a mirror with that which is reflected in the glass. It is as if the stroke were drawn across another plane, layered over the page of writing. Rubbing or scratching out, however, erodes the surface itself. When the same surface is repeatedly reused, as was common with writing on parchment, past traces come up while the traces of the present sink down. The same goes for the reuse of the ground, in cycles of cultivation. Both lead to the formation of a palimpsest. With the palimpsest, turning over is fundamental to renewal. The territorial state, by contrast, assumes the ground to be stratified into layers, stacked up in a temporal sequence. Renewal, then, can come only by adding further layers. We thus arrive at a distinction between two kinds of surface: the layered surface, covering up what went before and closed to what follows; and the deep surface, that covers nothing but itself yet nevertheless rises into the open. These surfaces embody, respectively, the contrary principles of stratigraphy and anti-stratigraphy. Camouflage works by tricking us into taking one kind of surface for another. The example of burial, however, shows how both principles can combine. Burying the past puts it down but will not make it go away. Only when it finally rises to the surface can the past be wiped out by the ravages of time.

**KEYWORDS:** Deletion; Erasure; Interface; Memory; Palimpsest; Stratigraphy.

**RESUMEN:** Al editar un texto a mano, las líneas pueden tacharse, o eliminarse, en actos de borrado. Este artículo sostiene que el tachado y la supresión son opuestos, tanto operacionalmente como en sus efectos superficiales. Mientras que el tachado raya físicamente las palabras, ontológicamente no hace más contacto con la superficie sobre la que están escritas que una línea inscrita en un espejo con lo que se refleja en el vidrio. Es como si el trazo se dibujara a través de otro plano, superpuesto a la página de escritura.

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Sin embargo, frotar o rayar erosiona la superficie misma. Cuando la misma superficie se reutiliza repetidamente, como era común con la escritura en pergamino, surgen huellas del pasado mientras que las huellas del presente se hunden. Lo mismo ocurre con la reutilización del suelo, en ciclos de cultivo. Ambos conducen a la formación de un palimpsesto. Con el palimpsesto, darse la vuelta es fundamental para la renovación. El estado territorial, por el contrario, asume que el suelo está estratificado en capas, apilado en una secuencia temporal. La renovación, entonces, solo puede llegar agregando más capas. Llegamos así a una distinción entre dos tipos de superficie: la superficie estratificada, que cubre lo anterior y se cierra a lo que sigue; y la superficie profunda, que no cubre nada más que a sí misma y, sin embargo, se eleva al aire libre. Estas superficies encarnan, respectivamente, los principios contrarios de estratigrafía y antiestratigrafía. El camuflaje funciona engañándonos para que tomemos un tipo de superficie por otra. El ejemplo del entierro, sin embargo, muestra cómo ambos principios pueden combinarse. Enterrar el pasado lo pone a un lado, pero no lo hará desaparecer. Solo cuando finalmente salga a la superficie, el pasado podrá ser borrado por los estragos del tiempo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Tachado; Borrado; Interfaz; Memoria; Palimpsesto; Estratigrafía.

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## INTRODUCTION

We are all familiar with ‘track changes’, as a function of word-processing. It allows us to insert deletions and additions into a text in such a way that these amendments remain visible to another party. But this is only a mechanical imitation of what we used to do in the past, when everyone wrote with a pen. Then, if you wanted to correct something, you would have to cross it out, maybe adding some substitute text between the lines or in a balloon. But what if you didn’t want anyone else to see what you had done? With the word processor, erasure is all too easy: merely block the text, and with a touch of a button it is gone for good. How many of us, at one time or another, have erased text precipitately or by accident, only to regret it later? Trying to cover your tracks on a handwritten manuscript, however, is another matter altogether. The older among us will surely recall the trials of removing pen-lines with a coarse ink-rubber. It was almost impossible to succeed without scuffing the paper itself. The challenge was to remove the line without rubbing off so much of the surface as to put it at risk of tearing. Marks made with a graphite pencil, of course, were easier to erase, yet the impressions made in the surface by the sharp pencil point would still remain. No paper, once written upon, could be restored to pristine purity. And if we go back even further in time, to the days when scribes wrote on parchment or vellum, the only way to erase previous writing was to scratch the surface with a knife. But since the inky stains could never be removed completely, new writing would always have to contend with interference from the traces of the old.

Much has been written on the arts of verbal inscription. Deletion and erasure, however, have

received less attention. Rather more surprisingly, where they *have* been considered, there has been a tendency to confuse the two. Thus philosophers from Martin Heidegger to Jacques Derrida have described deletion as a matter of putting words ‘under erasure’ (*sous rature*).<sup>2</sup> My principal objective in this article, is to show, to the contrary, that deletion and erasure are operations of completely different kinds, with opposite effects not just on words but on the surfaces on which they are written. More generally, I shall show how this difference bears on the preservation, concealment and obliteration of traces of the past, whether on the page or in the ground, and thus on what it means to remember and forget. I shall show that what deletion strikes *down*, erasure brings *up*, and therefore that that the idea of putting the past ‘under erasure’ is as oxymoronic as supposing that the way to bury a body is by exhuming it. Yet there is more, because passing off one as the other – deletion as erasure – is key to the illusion of camouflage. It has been used throughout history as a tactic to conceal acts of violence, and to contrive to eradicate the evidence of atrocity. Masking a deleted past under cover of erasure tricks us into thinking that it never happened. To begin, however, I shall return to the operations themselves. What results when you cross words out or strike them through? How does the stroke of the pen, in the act of deletion, differ from the wiggling micromovements of the hand which produced the original text? How do both the stroke and the wiggle differ from the gesture or rubbing or scratching, in the act of erasure? And above all,

2 This idea is discussed at length by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1974), in her translator’s introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

what do these differences tell us about the relations between line and surface?

### THE STROKE OF DELETION

In a world of life, lines grow from the tip. Roots and runners, feeling their way through the soil, twist and turn in response to ever-varying conditions. Shoots and saplings flex as they compete to find their place in the sun. On land, animals track erratically through the undergrowth, while birds flutter from branch to branch, or soar on winding currents of air. On a city street people weave in and out to avoid collision; in the countryside they walk irregular paths as they negotiate hedgerows, outcrops and puddles. And in the simple act of writing with a pen, fingertip gestures of the thinking hand leave a meandering trace in the form of the letter-line. This may proceed from left to right, as in most occidental writing systems, or from right to left or top to bottom. Yet whatever its orientation, the pen makes only slow progress from one margin of the page to the other. Much of the time it oscillates across the general direction of travel, or even loops back before issuing forth again. On a ruled page, as in an exercise book, the letter-line oscillates between the rules, much as on the loom, the weft oscillates between the warp threads. It is likely that the metaphor of the text, which compares writing to a woven fabric, is founded on this resemblance, though it could also be that the first books to be called texts were actually written on linen, and that this designation remained after linen was replaced first by parchment and then by paper.<sup>3</sup> Either way, if the textual surface is woven, then to write on a page already written is not so much to write *over* it but to insert an additional thread *into* it. But as we shall see, with the stroke of deletion, it is quite otherwise.

The strikethrough is sudden, violent and explosive. The axe, striking through timber, cleaves it in twain; the swords of warriors, striking through flesh, leave the battlefield strewn with severed limbs; heads roll from under the guillotine. And a canvas, slashed by the

vandal's knife, is left with a gaping tear. In every case, the cutting edge is propelled like a projectile, under its own momentum. Striking through text with a pen, however, has no such dire consequences. The gesture is similar. It is equally impulsive. The hand swings into action, and proceeds without hesitation or deviation. While the letter-line, on its meandering course, gropes its way forward from the tip, never entirely sure where it is going, the line of the strikethrough flies like a projectile, under its own momentum, cutting through everything in its path. Unless guided by a rule, it leaves an arc-like trace in its wake. Yet unlike axe, sword, guillotine or knife, the pen leaves the material intact, its surface undamaged. An image such as on a picture postcard, crossed by a stroke, can still be seen; a text, as on the reverse of the card, can still be read. To be sure, the intruding line can get in the way, making both viewing and reading a little more difficult. But compared to slicing or shredding, which tears the surface itself, splitting letters into pieces that would have to be reassembled to be read, the inscriptive strikethrough uniquely preserves its deletions, and may even enhance their significance. As the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat admits: '~~cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them~~'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed it takes only a slight downward shift to convert the crossover into an underline, and deletion into emphasis. The question is: how is this possible?

Before venturing an answer, we have first to turn from deletion to erasure, and consider what is involved in that other operation, of scratching or rubbing out. This calls for a back-and-forth oscillatory movement, perhaps best described as a 'wipe' (a verb derived from the Proto-Germanic *wipjan*, 'to move back and forth').<sup>5</sup> Compared to both writing or drawing and crossing out, where all the movement is drawn to a focus at the point of pen or pencil, with wiping it is distributed across a surface. The wipe-out is neither precisely measured out nor targeted; it covers a surface without delimiting it, and ever exceeds or overflows any delineations in seeks to erase. If the movement of the pen, in writing, can be likened to the procession of roots through the soil, or of feet on a path, then scratching or rubbing out is akin to the

3 On the parallel between writing and weaving, see Ingold (2007: 68-71). The earliest evidence for linen books comes from pre-Roman Etruria, around the second century BCE. Only isolated fragments of these books remain, however, along with occasional depictions of what they may have looked like (Mareile Haase, personal communication).

4 Raphael Rubinstein (2018-19: 21), from the exhibition *UNDER ERASURE*, curated by Heather and Raphael Rubinstein, Pierogi Gallery, New York.

5 On the wipe, see Ingold (2017: 101).

way wind and rain work the surface of the ground, exposing roots, eroding footprints, and washing away tracks and trails. For scratching parchment you would use a knife, yet in a way that is contrary to its proper function. The knife is designed as a cutting tool, but in erasure the sharp edge is drawn not longitudinally but laterally, so as to scrape material from the surface rather than incise a line through it. For erasing lines on paper you would likely use a rubber, designed for the purpose. Grasping the rubber firmly between the thumb and index finger, you drag it back and forth over the line you seek to erase, gradually shifting the axis of oscillation along its length. Both the paper surface and the rubber itself are gradually ground down by this operation, leaving a granular residue to be swept up afterwards. And in this lies the key to the distinction between deletion and erasure.

Returning, then, to the question I left hanging a moment ago: how can the strikethrough preserve, or even highlight, its deletions? Comparison with the cutting stroke of the axe, sword or knife offers a clue to the answer. For the woodcutter, for example, axe and tree belong to the same world as he does, and the operation of felling timber sets up a circuit of perception and action in which all three – cutter, axe and tree – are conjoined. It is the same when you take a sword to flesh, or a knife to canvas. But with the stroke of the pen it is different. Physically, of course, the pen-nib is in contact with the very same surface, of paper or parchment, that already bears the inscriptions it sets out to delete. And the line it inscribes intersects the original lines of text. Ontologically, however, the text and its deletion belong to parallel but distinct planes of reality which are layered, one over the other, *without ever making contact*. To explain how this is possible, let me revert to the example of the picture postcard. Suppose that the picture side bears a photo of an Alpine landscape, dominated by a famous peak. With a pen, you strike a line across the profile of the peak. Of course the mountain itself remains untouched, because your line has only effaced its image. But now, turn the card over, and do the same, striking your line across the handwritten message on the reverse. Why should it be any different? ‘This is Mont Blanc’, the message says, ‘I am holidaying here and can see it with my own eyes’. Your correspondent is there, with the mountain, in the same world. But you are not. And in crossing over her words, you are in fact writing on their reflection in *your* world.

We touch here on the same paradox as did René Magritte, in his celebrated painting of 1929, ‘The Treachery of Images’ (*La Trahison des images*). Beneath a cannily realistic depiction of a smoker’s tobacco pipe, Magritte wrote the words *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, ‘this is not a pipe’. His point was that you cannot stuff a painting of a pipe with tobacco, however realistic it may be, let alone smoke it. Had he written ‘this is a pipe’ below the image, Magritte protested, he would have been lying. Yet despite his protestations of innocence, it is actually Magritte who is playing a trick on us, his viewers. The trick is to place both the image and the writing in the same picture plane. What we see, then, is an image not just of the pipe but of the writing. And the writing tells a lie, because in the world the painting depicts, the pipe is indeed a real object, which you could stuff and smoke. Likewise, your correspondent would have been lying had she written on the card, ‘This is not Mont Blanc’. In fact she wrote the truth. But her world is accessible to you only by way of its images. It is as if you were seeing it in a looking glass. Your deletions mark the glass, but they do not touch what is reflected therein. Your lines can no more tangle with letter-lines of the text than they can penetrate behind the glass. Nor, conversely, can the letter-line emerge from behind the glass into the world on the hither side. To be sure, the letter-line can loop around itself and, as we have already seen, other lines can be woven into the same text. But the one thing the letter-line absolutely cannot do is cross itself out. Notwithstanding Magritte’s claim to the contrary, *self-deletion is impossible*.

While it might be nonsensical, then, to think of placing written words ‘under erasure’, it makes good sense for them to be placed ‘under deletion’ – or better, perhaps, ‘*behind* deletion’. It is equivalent to placing them on the far side of a framed window. Just now, as I write indoors, at my desk, I can see through a picture window to the trees at the back of my garden. But the window is divided into panes, and the horizontal transom that divides the upper from the lower panes cuts straight across my view, obscuring a feature I want to see. I only have to raise my sights a little, however, and the transom line shifts, through parallax, from across the feature to directly beneath it, lending it a heightened prominence within the frame. But the transom, of course, belongs to my interior world, not to the world behind the glass. It is the same with the strikethrough and the letter-line. All it takes to turn a strikethrough into an

underline is to shift one's gaze a little. It is as if the two planes, respectively before and behind, or over and under, were not fixed in place but could slide relative to one another. But written lines exist in two dimensions, and cannot jump the planes to which they are confined. If self-deletion is impossible, so likewise, is self-underlining. And yet a certain kind of jump is possible; it is what we know as imagination. Thus while I cannot access my friend's Alpine holiday world directly, I can fly there in thought. I can imagine it. Perhaps, then, the superimposition of the two planes epitomises the condition of the writer whose imagination roams heaven and earth while his hand, restricted to the interior world of the study, is locked into a myopic engagement with the page.

### THE FACE OF ERASURE

It is now time to return from the strikethrough of deletion to the wipe-out of erasure. I suggested earlier that erasure brings things up, rather than putting them below or behind. This calls for some explanation. To begin, let me go back to the earlier days of writing, in the medieval era, when it was done with pen and ink on parchment. One property of parchment, as a writing material, is that its surface is rather absorbent. The ink sinks in. Compared with the mass-produced paper of today, moreover, parchment was rather expensive. For this reason, it was common for the same material to be repeatedly reused. To do this, as already mentioned, the surface would be scraped with a knife – the same knife that was used to sharpen the quill and score the guidelines – until the traces of previous writing had, so far as possible, been erased. It was impracticable, however, to remove them altogether. Thus vestiges of earlier inscriptions always remained. Rewriting on parchment bearing the partially erased inscriptions of preceding use results in what palaeographers call a *palimpsest*. This is a term that has also found its way, by analogy, into the discipline of archaeology, where it refers to a ground that has been used time after time. In the early 1950s Osbert Crawford, one of the originators of the metaphor, compared roads, field boundaries, woods, farms and other habitations to letters and words, which are inscribed on the land, just as with writing on parchment, to form a palimpsest, 'a document that has been written on and erased over and over again'. It was the business of archaeology, he said, to decipher it (Crawford 1953: 51). But what

exactly happens when, between one writing and the next, parchment is erased, or between one cultivation and the next, ground is cleared?

The answer is highly counterintuitive. We are so accustomed to thinking of a world that is built up in layers, with each successive layer riding over its predecessor. And to the extent that older layers can still be seen, we imagine that every layer is partially transparent, rather like an acetate sheet. We can write on the sheet, but as we place it over previous ones, the writing on the latter shows through, with a clarity that fades with depth. So the earlier the inscriptions, the deeper down they are, and the fainter their visibility in the present. The remarkable thing about the palimpsest, however, is precisely that it is formed *not* by adding layer upon layer, each with its own inscriptions, but by taking them away. As a result, older traces rise up to the surface, even as newer ones sink down. We can best see how this occurs by means of a diagram (Figure 1). This shows a parchment in exaggerated cross section, such that a line of ink appears as a vertical mark, as wide as the line is thick and as deep as the ink sinks into the fabric of the parchment. In the diagram I have indicated two lines inscribed at time  $T_0$ . Later, at time  $T_1$ , the surface is scraped, and two new lines are inscribed close to the old ones. The same is done again at time  $T_2$ . Now, looking at the surface at  $T_2$ , observe what has happened to the traces. The original traces from  $T_0$  are only faintly visible right at the surface, and will surely disappear if the parchment is used again. The traces from  $T_1$  are shallower than they were, but still clear. Deepest and clearest of all are the most recent traces, from  $T_2$ . Here, the depth of the line is *inversely* proportional to its faintness.

As with inscriptions on parchment, so with tracks on the ground. Our propensity to think of the world in layers leads us to imagine that with every new intervention – a path walked, a road built, a field tilled – a fresh film were laid out over the entire terrain, marked up with its own lines, which cross over and delete the markings of layers immediately below while leaving them intact and legible.<sup>6</sup> Look around in a long-inhabited landscape, however, and

6 Architectural theorist Francesco Careri, for example, compares the ground surface to 'an immense aesthetic territory ... on which to draw by walking'. Each walk, he says, 'adds one more layer' (Careri 2002: 150). Here, the act of inscribing a line in a surface is recast as one of laying out a surface already inscribed by a line.

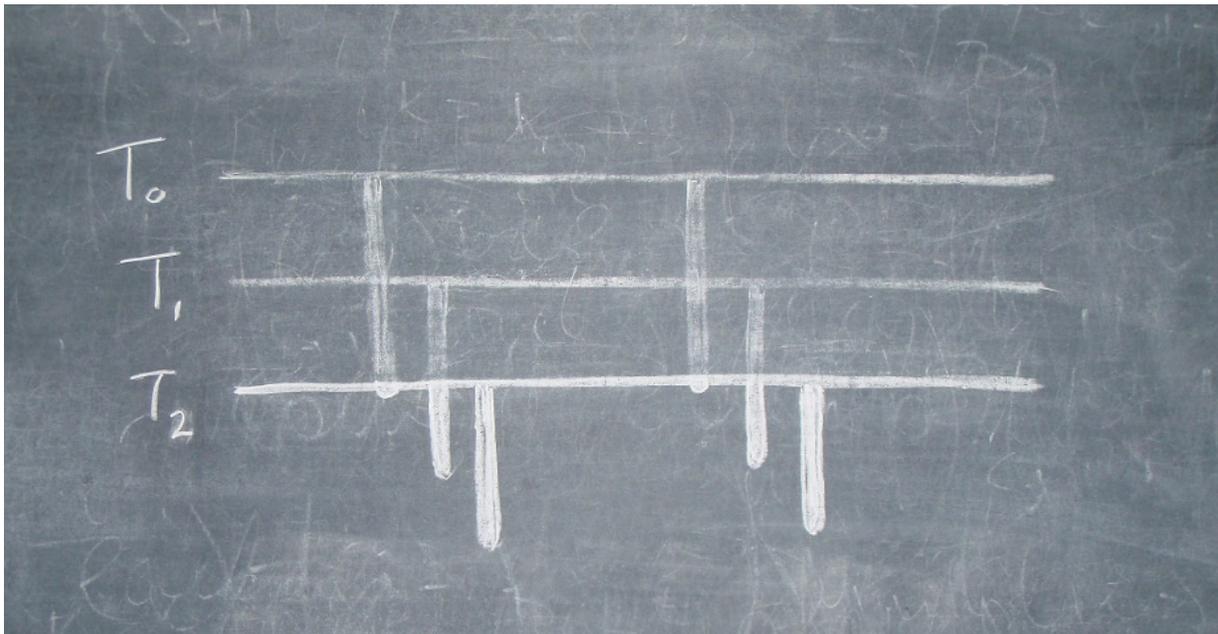


FIGURE 1.— Exaggerated cross-section of a palimpsest.

your observations tell you otherwise. While you can still make out the traces of ancient tracks, worn by feet from centuries past, they are not deep down but uppermost at the surface. Close to vanishing and barely visible, you may need a trained eye to see them. Before long, unless artificially preserved, the weather will wipe them out completely. By contrast, the newest incisions, recently cut in the landscape and not yet subject to significant erosion, are strongly marked. In between are historic traces that, while manifestly weather-beaten and sometimes obscured, are still easy to recognise. Thus in the land as on parchment, the past is not buried under the present but actually closest to the surface, while the present, undercutting the past, digs deepest. The past comes up as the present goes down. In short, the palimpsest, far from being formed from the overlaying of successive strata, embodies what I shall call the *anti-stratigraphic principle*.<sup>7</sup> Anti-stratigraphy is not about layering; it is about turning over. I shall have more to say about this idea of the turnover, but before doing so, we need to tackle another problem, which concerns the nature of the ground, or the page, as a surface. What kind of surface is this? How many sides does it have? Must it be penetrated if we are to find what lies beneath?

7 On stratigraphy and anti-stratigraphy, see Ingold (2018).

Can it be penetrated at all?

A layered surface, or stratum, has two sides: a topside and an underside. It separates that which lies, respectively, above and below, preventing the two domains from mixing. It can however function as an interface, allowing regulated passage between them, mediated by holes or apertures in the surface.<sup>8</sup> A hard pavement, for example, separates the earth below from the air above, but may include manholes allowing access to underground utility ducts. The outer casings of many everyday household artefacts work in the same way, hiding their inner workings while allowing an external operator to exercise limited control. But if a pavement can be an interface, what about the ground itself? If the casing of your phone can be an interface, what about the surface of a tool carved from wood or knapped from stone? If a sheet of film can be an interface, what about a page of writing? The unpaved ground is not covered over but open to the elements. Below lies the earth; above, the atmosphere. But far from keeping the two apart, while affording restricted

8 By definition, according to philosopher Branden Hookway (2014: 4), the interface has two sides, interior and exterior, or upper and lower, and serves both to separate what is on one side from what is on the other, and as a conduit for the transmission of information across the threshold between them.

transmission between them, the ground is constituted in their very intermingling. It is a surface, then, not of separation but of interpenetration, where the earth's rising, above all in the growth of vegetation, meets the atmosphere's bearing down, with the moisture, air and sunlight that fuels plant growth. The ground, then, is not an interface. It has no measurable thickness, no other side, yet it extends immeasurably in depth. You can dig into it, but never through it; it can be rutted with pits and ditches, but not riddled with holes. It is the same with the surface of an artefact of solid stone or wood. And critically, it is the same with the surface of the page of writing, above all when the writing is of ink on parchment.

A clue to the peculiar nature of this surface lies in the double meaning of the common English word 'wear'. It can mean to apply some form of coating, as in 'wearing' clothes. But it can also refer to a process of erosion through prolonged use or exposure, as in the expression 'wear and tear'. Paradoxically, the same word applies to both covering and erasure. How is this possible? With a logic of stratification, the two meanings would indeed be contradictory. Wearing as in putting on would add a layer, wearing as in stripping off would take it away. But with the anti-stratigraphic principle of the palimpsest, these are one and the same. For in the very process of erosion or erasure, or wiping out, depth comes to the surface. It is a surface that covers, but does not cover *up*, dresses without dressing *up*. It hides nothing but itself. And both covering and dressing are the work of care, manifested in livelihood, use and devotion: in the farmer's husbandry of the soil, the artisan's use of the tool, the scribe's or copyist's devotion to his lines. In the final volume of his *Modern Painters*, the Victorian critic and connoisseur John Ruskin described this kind of surface as a veil. His concern was primarily to understand the surface of the earth – 'a veil', he called it, 'of strange intermediate being' (Ruskin 1905: 14-15). Deep down, Ruskin argued, the earth is dead and cold, but at its surface, in its textures of meadows and forests, rocky outcrops, moor and heath, it ministers to its denizens through this veil. Its most distinctive property is that you can see *into* it, but not *through* it. Might we regard the page of writing in the same way? Might it, too, minister to its readers as the earth to its inhabitants?

At first glance, this seems implausible. Does a page, whether of paper or parchment, not have two sides? And the veil too, for that matter? How, then, can page

or veil be compared to the ground, or to the surface of carved wood or knapped stone? Yet the comparison, in fact, gives a clue to the answer. For there is a sense in which even a mountain, or an artefact, can have more than one side. Each side, however, is a face, and the face is a front with no back. For the climber to pass from one face of the mountain to the other, he must cross a ridge, whereupon a new vista comes into view. Likewise, the hand of the user can reach over from one face of a tool to the other only by crossing an edge. In both cases, *there is no going through*. So too with the veil: though it may be lifted to reveal the countenance of the wearer – much as mist may lift to reveal a landscape – it is not possible to see through it. Nor more can sight pass through the page of a book. For like the mythical Janus, the page has two faces, which are not so much front and back as the reverse of one another (Ingold 2018: 145). Every page, then, is tantamount to a fold in a continuous surface that has been squashed up like a concertina. Just as the mountaineer, traversing a folded landscape of ridges and valleys, must cross a ridge for a new vista to be revealed, so the reader has to lift the page at its edge and turn it over, to open the next chapter. In the turning, *recto* to *verso*, what was under, goes over, and vice versa. And in an anti-stratigraphic world – comprised of folds rather than layers – turning over is the fundamental act of renewal.

## OPENING AND CLOSING

Originally, however, the written surface was not folded, in the manner of a concertina, but rolled up to form a scroll. To read, it had to be unrolled. This is where our word 'volume' comes from; it is derived from the Latin *volvere*, 'to roll'. Historically, the scroll gave way to the manuscript book, or codex, at the point when the parchment was gathered into sheets, folded and bound along one edge, and these gatherings, in turn, bound between hardwood covers. With that, rolling and unrolling gave way to turning over. But the book was still called a volume. Typically, it would lie open in the reader's hands or on his desk. Laid out like this, it would be seen not in its thickness but in the spread of its pages. Not until the manuscript was replaced by the printed word was the book finally closed. For in the printed book, the pages are laid one over another to form a stack. Although you still have to turn the pages to read it, the book itself is now perceived as a thing of layered sheets to be worked *through*, top to bottom as beginning to end. Figure 2, showing the open codex

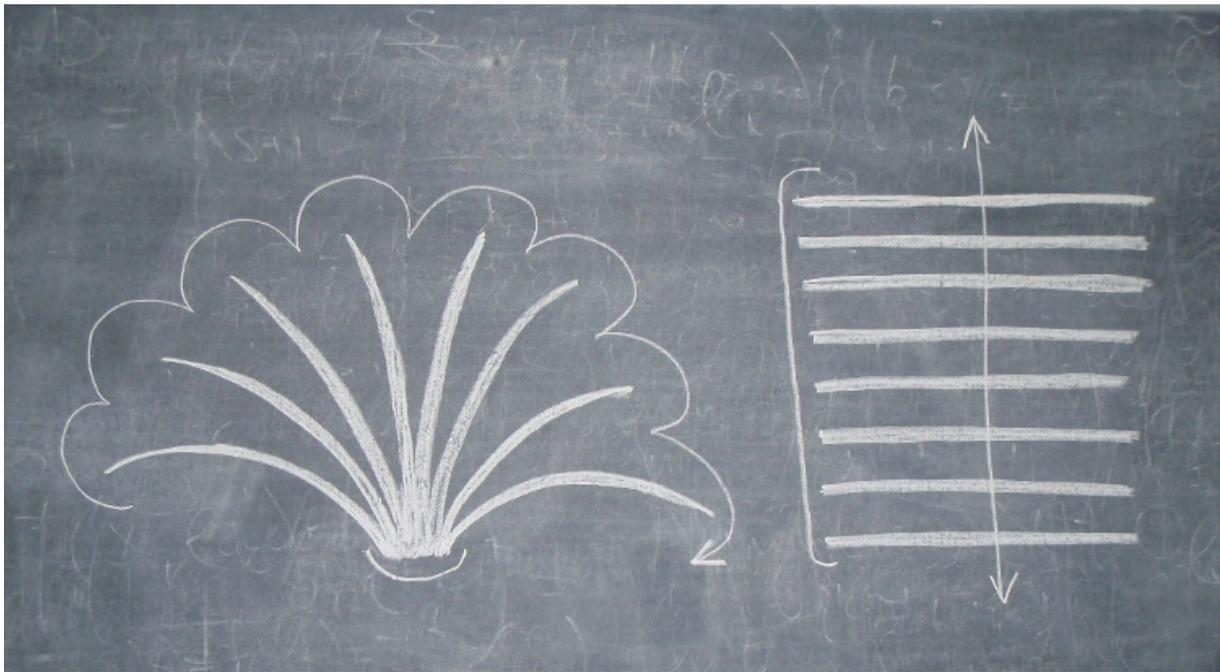


FIGURE 2.— Open codex and closed book in cross section.

and the closed book in diagrammatic cross section, illustrates this difference between folding and stacking, and between turning the pages and reading through. Today, when you retrieve what you call a 'volume' from your shelf, it is to the layered stack that you refer. The book is now encased within its covers, giving it the character of a box. It has become a container, and the words its contents. By extension, then, the volume of any form, whether material like a wooden box or ideal like an abstract geometrical figure, becomes the measure of its capacity to contain. The voluminous gives way to the volumetric.

What then becomes of the ground? Has it suffered the same fate, historically, as the book? It is not, of course, possible literally to roll up the ground like a sheet of parchment. But it can be turned. Consider the medieval ploughman, who would turn the ground with every seasonal turn in the agricultural calendar: in April for spring crops, June for the late summer harvest, and October for winter wheat and rye. The purpose of ploughing was both to prepare the earth for future planting, by breaking up the surface residues of the previous crop, and to bring up nutrient-rich soil from deeper down. Unlike the scribe, working with parchment, who would have first had to scrape the surface before writing his lines, with the curved ploughshare the husbandman could combine erasure

and inscription in a single act, at once cutting into the surface and raising soil from the depths. Thanks to this continual turnover, the ground would continue to yield, year after year. Following a cycle of rotation, fertility born of the past would bear fruit in present flourishing. Indeed the ground, speaking to the husbandman with the bounty of previous harvests, was a surface not just of cultivation but of remembering. For with every turn, memories of persons who lived or events that happened long ago would be brought to the surface so that inhabitants could engage with them directly, as if present in the here and now. Again, this has its parallel with the pages of the book, which would speak to the reader with voices of the past, its letters and words springing to life in the present like seeds germinating in the soil. With the page as with the ground, the past would rise up, even as the present sinks down. And time, as it passed, would continue to turn.

In the modern imagination, however, enshrined in the political logic of the territorial state, the ground is not for turning. It is for conquest, colonisation and occupation. Far from inscribing its ways into the land as does the husbandman, or like the penman into parchment, the state imposes sovereignty from above, much as with the printing press, letters are imposed upon the sheet. Every new impression, then, calls for a new sheet, or a new ground. The ground, here, figures not as a

surface to be actively restored and cultivated but as a passive substrate upon which to map out the strategic designs of the present. As such, it holds no potential for renewal. For the past is already over, sunk into its own stratum, overlain and deleted in the execution of present designs. And whatever their claims to perpetuity, these designs are destined, in their turn, to be deleted by those of the future. The earth's depth is now understood to be not so much enrolled in a cycle as layered in a stack, wherein every layer belongs to its own time, only to be superseded by the next. Renewal depends upon superimposition –on adding another layer to the stack, and then another, and another. Time, then, no longer turns or folds the ground into a volume. It rather pierces through successive grounds like an arrow, pointing either upwards from past to present, or downwards from present to past. Here every ground, every layer, establishes its own plane of synchrony, while layer succeeds layer in a diachronic sequence.<sup>9</sup> To reach the past, as in archaeological excavation, you have to dig down. Memory has become an archive, deposited in a stack with the oldest records furthest down. And there they stay, sinking ever deeper as time moves on.

Setting out from the distinction between deletion and erasure, or strike-through and wipe-out, we have arrived at another, between two kinds of surface, whether of page or ground. One is the layered surface, which covers up what went before and is closed to what follows. The other is the deep surface, that covers nothing but itself yet nevertheless rises into the open. One is stratigraphic, the other anti-stratigraphic. I have presented these as alternatives, even to the extent of aligning them to a contrast between modernity and tradition. It is surely no accident that my examples of erasure have come from the practices of medieval scribes and ploughmen, whereas for deletion I have turned to the strategic machinations of the modern state.<sup>10</sup> Yet this contrast is surely artificial. Is it not more reasonable to suppose that these alternatives, far from standing on opposite sides of a great divide in the history of the world, have always existed, and have continually answered to one another? In different periods, or regions, one side may have been ascendant,

or given greater ideological prominence, but the other would have ever been present in the background. It is, after all, in the nature of ideologies to be lop-sided. And they can deceive, by leading us to mistake one kind of surface for another. This is how camouflage works. It tricks the perceiver into supposing that what is actually a double-sided layer, covering up that which is hidden within or beneath, is really a face that is open to the world. Thus the military commander paints the tarpaulins under which he conceals his tanks in motley shades of green and brown, rendering them indistinguishable, to aerial reconnaissance, from the face of the earth. The face, as you will recall, is a front without a back. And having no back, it appears to have nothing to hide.

But the deceit can work the other way as well, though perhaps less intentionally. In many parts of the world, landscapes are dotted with mounds of various sizes, from the insignificant to the monumental. They have been around since time immemorial. Prehistorians call them *tumuli*. Just how and why tumuli were formed remains a matter of controversy, which need not detain us here. Suffice it to note that any accumulation of waste material, whether from the construction of earthworks or from everyday domestic habitation, is liable to settle, more or less of its own accord, into the form of a mound. As such, the mound is nothing more than a swelling of the earth that covers nothing, and is open to the elements (Ingold 2013: 75-8). This has not, however, deterred legions of prehistorians from excavating their *tumuli*, in the conviction that buried inside each must be a body. Occasionally, they have struck lucky, and been rewarded with sensational finds. But more often than not, their excavations have yielded only quantities of earth and rubble. Their error has been to imagine the face of the earth as a twin-sided layer or enclosure which, consequently, must have *something* to hide. But could the practice of burial point to a different conclusion? That many (though not all) humans are accustomed to burying their dead is irrefutable. In his *New Science* of 1725, Giambattista Vico went so far as to speculate that the very word 'human' has its source in the Latin word for burying, *humando*, itself derived from *humus*, soil. Humans, then, would above all be people of the soil, who bury their dead. They come from the earth, and will ever return to it. Might burial, then, establish a peculiarly human relation to the ground, and to the past, in which opening and closure, far from being mutually exclusive, may actually alternate?

9 This is the source of the dichotomy between synchrony and diachrony, famously elaborated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his course in general linguistics delivered at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911.

10 The distinction also aligns with that between 'strategy' and 'tactics', in the work of Michel de Certeau (1984).

Imagine the phases of a burial, as it might have been practised in antiquity. First, the earth is opened. Material is removed to form a pit, into which the body is laid. After the necessary ritual formalities, it is then covered with a slab of stone. In the grave, the slab forms a layer with two sides, upper and lower, concealing the body beneath. For the living, however, sealing the slab does nothing to extinguish the memory of the deceased; on the contrary, it remains deeply engraved in their hearts and minds. Yet with the passage of time and generations, memories gradually fade, even as vegetation encroaches over the slab, contributing to the formation of soil. Eventually, after many centuries or even millennia, the grave site is left indistinguishable from its surroundings, save perhaps for a small hump or a stone to mark its location. Once again, the ground of the site shows its face to the sky. With the grave long forgotten, people go about their lives completely unaware that anything lies below, until, perhaps, it is exposed by natural erosion or the ministrations of archaeologists. As this story of burial shows, bringing closure to the past is one thing; erasing it quite another. Drawing a line over the past, or sealing it underground, will not make it go away. If anything, as with text under deletion, we strain harder to read it, bringing it even more insistently to our attention. Just as the insomniac's attempts to fall asleep make him all the more wakeful, so our efforts to forget the past have the opposite effect of bringing it more vividly to mind. Yet as surely as sleep eventually comes, so the past will be forgotten. In the mind, however, as in the landscape, it fades not by sinking deeper down but by rising to the surface.

#### AND FINALLY...

What does all this mean for the way we think about memory? Our modern sensibilities, as we have seen, are profoundly conditioned by the idea that everything is formed of layers – that the ground, trees, buildings, books and even human minds are built up, layer upon layer, with each layer already marked up with its own striations. The past, then, is visible only by way of the translucence of the present. But the anti-stratigraphic logic of the palimpsest teaches us otherwise. It tells us that with the passage of time, material is not added but worn away, and that to mark it up means cutting deep. As in the palimpsest, our oldest memories are not the deepest, nor are the most recent the shallowest. On the contrary, what is furthest in the past is closest to

the surface. In our minds as well as in the ground we tread, our recent deeds and words are most profoundly seared, while traces of the distant past are so shallow as to be on the point of disappearing altogether, erased by the winds of present suffering. Like old paths grown so faint as to be no longer recognisable, memories only truly fade as they surface into a present whose texture, like that of a veil, is opaque. There is surely a lesson here for tyrants everywhere, who believe that their murderous acts can be struck out, deleted from the record, and hidden underground. They imagine the ground as a cover-up, thinking that beneath it, the evidence can be forever concealed from posterity. This is literally to overlook the past, in both senses of the word: it is to keep it under surveillance, but at the same time to turn a blind eye. Yet deeds have their come-uppance, and will only be gone, once and for all, when they finally surface, to be wiped out by the ravages of time.

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