

Hot-Air Textuality: Literature after Jerome McGann

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Abstract

*I argue that McGann's *Radiant Textuality* (2001), shaped by postmodern literary theory and the nature of electronic texts, is wrong-headed—that McGann's valorization of the instability of texts and interpretation leads to poor results. It concentrates on three examples: a scanner experiment that leads to the dictum that "no text is self-identical," a "deformance" of Stevens's "The Snowman" that results in the claim that the poem is noun-heavy, and a discussion of Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" that suggests it is a good modernist poem about sex. I claim that, on the contrary, texts are remarkably stable, Stevens uses only an average number of nouns, and "Trees" can be better understood by focusing more closely upon and altering its language. In all three cases, McGann's approach, because it so consistently points away from the text, provides little insight into the nature of text and interpretation, while a text-centered, language-centered approach is much more illuminating.*

KEYWORDS: Text analysis, Performative criticism, Interpretation, Text alteration.

Jerome McGann is certainly not the only modern critic to embrace the instability of the sign and the problematic nature of interpretation, or to revel in the infinite play of the signifiers, but his *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* provides an excellent opportunity to examine some of the negative consequences of this approach. In spite of my rude title, the book is often provocative and insightful, occasionally profound, and always fascinating. But here I want to concentrate on three instances, all concerning "deformance" and interpretation, in which it also seems wrong-headed and counterproductive. I will argue that there is a connection between McGann's valorization of the instability of texts and the indeterminacy of interpretation and these instances of wrong-headedness, and that different emphases and different techniques can lead to different results—results that tell us more about literature.

I begin with McGann's scanning experiment, in which an advertisement page from a Victorian periodical is scanned and subjected to OCR repeatedly. The document is first scanned and processed, then reprocessed without rescanning, then rescanned and processed again. It is also rescanned as black and white rather than greyscale, and is lifted and replaced on the scanner before being rescanned and processed. Not surprisingly, given the complexity of the document (part of the page is in two columns, there are several different fonts of different sizes, some of them very small, and the contrast is not very good), these operations yield documents with different numbers of zones and with some variation in the alphanumeric text, though McGann does not tell us how much variation (144-46).¹

The scanning experiment leads McGann explicitly to a series of propositions, including the following:

1. That what we call "a text" should be understood as a document composed of both semantical and graphical signifying parts...
2. That there is no such thing as an unmarked text...
3. a) That marked text, a document, is interpreted text.
b) That text documents, while *coded* bibliographically and semantically, are all *marked* graphically...
4. a) That texted documents are not containers of meaning or data but sets of rules (algorithms) for generating themselves: for discovering, organizing, and utilizing meanings and data. . . .
b) That these rules—the rationale of the texted document—are necessarily ambiguous because the rules are being repeatedly reread (i.e., executed), whether the reader is conscious of this or not. . . .
c) That the rules of marked text—the descriptive/ performative protocols—can be made apparent (rendered visible) *as such* through another marking program. (But many of these rules, now so historically remote, will have become too obscure to recover.)
5. That a certain class of texts—poetical texts, so called—are normative for all textual documents because their generic rationale is to maximize attention to the structure and interplay of the textual orders. (138)²

These propositions are both important and reasonable: some facts about written texts are easy to forget because written texts are so familiar that our own processing of them is mostly automatic and goes largely unnoticed. But McGann goes on to make a further and more radical observation:

Several important consequences flowed from these experiments. First, we now possessed a powerful physical argument for a key principle of “textual deformance” and its founding premise: that no text is self-identical. Whatever the physical “causes” of the variant readings, and however severely one sought to maintain the integrity of the physical operation, it appeared that variance would remain a possibility. (145)

Like many skeptical arguments, this one is finally irrefutable except by kicking a text down a hill. As ineffective as such a refutation is logically or philosophically, however, its practical appeal is undeniable. We may be convinced by a philosophical argument that external objects cannot be proven to exist, but such an argument does not make us trip over large stones. Our own experience of the world provides cognitively-grounded physical and bodily arguments that are far more powerful than rhetoric. In some important ways, even gravity may be a social construct, but the critic who believes this is in greater danger of falling victim to a physicist’s hoax than in becoming a falling victim (for a thorough recent discussion of the famous hoax, see Guillory). In a similar way, we may agree that no text is ever identical to itself, that no text exists except in and as an act of reading, an act of interpreting the rules (graphic, semantic, phonetic, rhetorical, ideological, cultural) of the text. Indeed, according to the standard current view of the nature of the physical world, even the book as a physical object (rather than a linguistic/mental/cultural object) changes over time at the atomic level, and so is never self-identical. But it is also important to remember the relative solidity of the text, and to keep its instability—like the book’s, like gravity’s—in perspective.

McGann’s original idea was to follow the Victorian advertisement experiment with a similar experiment on “a relatively straightforward piece of prose formatted margin-to-margin in standard block form.” (144). Rather than speculate on why McGann reports only the results of experiments on a graphically complex text with poor contrast, I would like to present some results from an experiment more like the second one

he proposes. To perform this experiment, I used an inexpensive Cannon 5000F scanner and the OCR software that ships with Microsoft Office 2003 to process a page from an article in *Computers and the Humanities* (Jørgensen 310). I cut the page out of my personal copy of CHUM with a razor knife, cut off the header with an only slightly non-self-identical razor knife, and then used Microsoft Office Document Imaging to scan, perform OCR, and send the text to Microsoft Word 2003, selecting the default settings at every point. When OCR was finished, I saved the document as S1P1.TXT, where “S” is for “scan” and “P” is for “process.” I then reprocessed the scanned image and saved it as S1P2.TXT; scanned the page again, reprocessed it, and saved it as S2P1.TXT; scanned it as greyscale, processed it, and saved it as S3P1.TXT; removed the page from the scanner, replaced it, scanned and processed it again (black and white), and saved it as S4P1.TXT. Finally, for comparison purposes, I used the “Selected Text” tool in Adobe Reader to mark the text in the online version of the article at Kluwer, and then copied it into a blank Word document and saved it as 310K.TXT. All six documents were saved as plain text. I then compared the resulting files with FC.EXE, the file comparison utility included in Windows XP Professional, which locates any differences and displays the parts of the files that are different. I also examined the files in WordPerfect 12 (which opened and saved all of the files as ANSI Windows Text) to pinpoint the differences. The results are, quite predictably, less variable than McGann’s.

The only difference between S1P1 and S1P2 is in the following line:

S1P1 a request such as “Get me more like the *ones I just* found.”

S1P2 a request such as “Get me more like the *ones ljust* found.”

S1P1 is clearly correct, as a visual examination of the printed text confirms; there seems to be plenty of space around “I” and no obvious reason that “I j” should be misinterpreted. (The trio of “I,” “l,” and “1”—that is, “eye,” “ell,” and “one,” is one of the banes of OCR programs and is not easy for humans to distinguish either. Perhaps this is another sign of the disappearance of the unified subject.) When I added a space to S1P2 before *just*, saved the file as S1P2R, and compared the two files, FC.EXE detected no differences.

Next I compared S1P1 and S2P1 in the same way, and found exactly the same difference:

S1P1 a request such as “Get me more like the *ones I just* found.”

S2P1 a request such as “Get me more like the *ones Ijust* found.”

When I added a space to S2P1 before *just*, saved the file as S2P1R, and compared the two files, FC.EXE detected no differences.

Comparing S1P1 and S3P1 (the greyscale scan) revealed the same difference and two new ones:

S1P1 a request such as “Get me more like the *ones I just* found.”

S3P1 a request such as “Get me more like the *ones Ijust* found.”

S1P1 a simple one-to-one *visuallverbal* replacement strategy

S3P1 a simple one-to-one *visual/verbal* replacement strategy

S1P1 more complex *in the* computerized environment, and identified

S3P1 more complex *n the* computerized environment, and identified

I added a space before *just* and changed *n* to *in* in S3P1 and saved it as S3P1R, and changed *visuallverbal* to *visual/verbal* in S1P1 and saved it as S1P1R. After these changes, FC.EXE detected no differences between S1P1R and S3P1R.

Next I compared S1P1R with S4P1 and found two familiar differences:

S1P1R a simple one-to-one *visual/verbal* replacement strategy

S4P1R a simple one-to-one *visuallverbal* replacement strategy

S1P1R a request such as “Get me more like the *ones I just* found.”

S4P1R a request such as “Get me more like the *ones Ijust* found.”

Once the obvious corrections were made, FC.EXE detected no differences.

Finally, to facilitate a comparison between the scanned documents and the one derived from the PDF, I standardized their lineation, opening both S1P1R and 310K and replacing all hard returns with single spaces, and then replacing each instance of two consecutive spaces with a single space. I saved the documents as S1P1RBLOCK and 310KBLOCK, and compared them with FC.EXE, which detected no differences. A careful visual examination of S1P1R and the original printed text detected only

two additional differences: 1. the OCR software has removed the line-end hyphen that appears between the *l* and the *d* of *children* in the printed version; 2. the hyphenated compound *Browse-Searcher*, which appears divided at the hyphen at the end of a line in the printed version, appears in both the scanned and the PDF-derived texts with an extraneous space after the hyphen. (This is a loose way of speaking, of course; the paper text and the electronic “copy” are different in many other obvious ways.)

What does this experiment suggest? McGann might focus on the fact that this very clean, clear text without much “graphical marking” remains slightly unstable under computer processing, but it might be more useful to focus on the need for further improvements in scanning equipment and OCR software. Perhaps the experiment really does show that no text is self-identical, yet the degree of instability seems remarkably insignificant. My use of *correct*, *correction*, and *misinterpret* in describing the differences among the output documents above is evidence that McGann is right in a radical sense: the readings can only be correct or incorrect from the point of view of another processing, this time a human one that is itself an interpretation open to instability. But the experiment is also evidence that from a practical point of view it is reasonable and judicious to assume that the text is self-identical, at least to a very close approximation, especially if we limit its interpretation to a single reader and a short time-span. This assumption of self-identity remains appropriate and reasonable if we limit ourselves to, say, literate native English speakers in the United States in the twenty-first century.

It would be surprising if a group of such readers couldn’t agree on the graphological and linguistic characteristics of the text under discussion. For example, an argument over which letters are present at each point in the text or over the interpretation of the hyphen in *Browse-Searcher* would be little less than astonishing, and the entire group would almost certainly agree on every graphical element of the text (perhaps after some brief discussion to correct “oversights” and “errors”), from the paragraph breaks to the word divisions, the identity of the punctuation, and the identity of each letter.³ Naturally, one can invent scenarios in which the text would be less stable. For example, there may be too little light to read (as Groucho Marx once said, “Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read”). Or perhaps some of the readers have visual impairments, or all the readers have been given LSD, or some of them are literary critics, but the existence (if not the precise nature) of these kinds of non-self-identity is predictable, and they are hardly of a kind that would

make McGann's statement seem profound or provocative.

The presence on page 310 of words like *robustly*, *enamored*, *surrogate*, *preconceived*, *enumerates*, and *continuum* suggests that a further limitation to a college-educated audience might be safer if we intend to examine the semantics of the text. It would be foolish to suggest that all readers would interpret the text identically on the semantic level, but equally foolish to suggest that there would not be a great deal of consistency in the accounts these readers would give of the meaning of the text. If that were not true, there could be no hope of Jørgensen's being understood in her *CHUM* article, or of my being understood in this one.

The small instabilities that become apparent in my scanning experiment strongly suggest the opposite of McGann's main thesis about the instability of the text. At most five distinct points of instability arise in five separate OCR processings, none of which would be likely to have any effect on the interpretation of the text. Only one of the instabilities involves the identity of a letter: *visuallverbal* versus *visual/verbal*. One involves the presence or absence of a single letter (*in the* versus *n the*), another involves the presence or absence of a space (*I just* versus *Ijust*), and the other two are hyphenation issues (*Browse-Searcher* versus *Browse- Searcher* and the hyphenation of *children*).

These last two examples clearly involve rules or algorithms for interpretation, to use McGann's useful characterization. A line-end hyphen means something like "combine the end of this line and the beginning of the following line into a single word and delete the hyphen unless the word is a compound that is normally printed with a hyphen at this spot." Attempting to state the reading/interpretation rule for a line-end hyphen precisely reveals complexities that we normally ignore. The ambiguity of such hyphens is an encoding bug hundreds of years old; another such bug is the widespread use of the same character for the apostrophe and the single quotation mark. Additional informal testing shows that this OCR program does well in combining the two parts of a simple word that has been hyphenated at the end of a line, even if it is an invented word, or is hyphenated at an inappropriate spot. It tends to retain the hyphen and add a following space in a compound word that is hyphenated at the end of a line in the same place where it is normally hyphenated when not at the end of a line. Thus *Browse- Searcher*, with an inappropriate space after the hyphen, is the norm rather than the exception, and seems preferable to the alternative without any hyphen or space.

This scanning experiment does not support McGann's radical

thesis about the instability of the text. Instead, it highlights the very high degree of stability in most texts—even when multiply processed, converted, and saved. Texts are very stable in the basic inventory and arrangement of their graphical elements, and in the potential for intersubjective consistency in the interpretation of these elements *as* elements. It is this stability, along with the linguistic and cultural stability built into the linguistic code itself and transmitted via that code to speakers of a language, that allows for a high degree of intersubjective agreement about the overall content and import of a text. Again, it will not do to claim too much: if none of the readers has ever heard of humanities computing or *CHUM*, or if none knows what a digital image is, the meaning of the text will be quite different for them than it is for a librarian specializing in digital images. But this is not the sort of instability that is sexy or provocative (though it could, perhaps, be made provocative in an analysis of the production, consumption, and value of such texts).

A more central and important instance of wrong-headedness is McGann and Samuels's "deformation" of poems, specifically Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man." Beginning with a quotation from Emily Dickinson about the possibility of reading a poem backward, McGann and Samuels try to recuperate what they see as a neglected, though venerable, kind of interpretative act, the performative or deformative interpretation. They rightly point out that a critical edition highlights its own performative/deformative nature, as does a translation (105-14), but they also note that in literary criticism, "Deformative scholarship is all but forbidden, the thought of it either irresponsible or damaging to critical seriousness" (114-15). Thus deformation of the "documentary foundation" of a text is rare because within interpretation meaning is thought to derive from the signs, which must remain inviolable (115). Their argument is that deformation is a particularly liberating and revealing kind of interpretation, for

deformation does not banish interpretation. The reversed text is still subject to, still giving of, interpretive readings. Deformation *does* want to show that *the poem's intelligibility is not a function of the interpretation, but that all interpretation is a function of the poem's systemic intelligibility*. Interpreting a poem after it has been deformed clarifies the secondary status of the interpretation. (120, emphasis in the original)

McGann and Samuels are right in emphasizing the intelligibility of texts, even reversed ones, but our meaning-making abilities are so generally valuable that they operate even in the presence of accidental rather than systemic intelligibility. This makes it impossible to read down a word frequency list for any sizable corpus without encountering sequences several words long that are accidentally meaningful. For example, the following sequence of fourteen words taken from the rank frequency list of a corpus of thirty British and American novels published around 1900 (Hoover, x-xiv) seems fairly intelligible when written as follows, certainly as intelligible as many modern poems:

Burning companion
(Heaven kissed ladies learn)
Leaves natural notice
O society, spread twice west!

Obviously, interpretations of “found poems” like this will show a good deal of variety, but it would be surprising if none of them involved romantic love or sunsets.

Not belonging to the “sacred artifact” school of criticism, I do not reject deformation, though I prefer the term *alteration*. And I applaud the insistence on the primacy of the text and the close attention to it that textual alteration requires. I have engaged in the kinds of violations of the documentary foundation of texts that McGann and Samuels claim is normally forbidden, and I will do so again below. For example, I “translate” the beginning of Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* into the *Neanderthal* dialect of Golding’s strange second novel, *The Inheritors* (Hoover, *Language* 155-68). More recently, I discuss some earlier examples of textual alteration and alter the famous opening paragraph of Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* in several different ways (Hoover, “Altered Texts” 99–118). A more thorough treatment of textual alteration from a perspective closer in spirit to McGann’s own work can be found Rob Pope’s wonderful *Textual Intervention*; in which he argues that “The best way to understand how a text works . . . is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done”(1). Textual alteration is a valuable interpretive and pedagogical tool, but the specific deformations that McGann and Samuels perform and the conclusions they draw from them are problematic at best.

But now to “The Snow Man.” After printing the poem as a prose paragraph, McGann and Samuels print only the nouns of the poem, leaving them in roughly their original positions in the lines and retaining the stanza breaks. The first sign of danger is the bizarre notion that printing only the nouns in this way “enhances the significance of the page’s white space, which now appears as a poetic equivalent for the physical ‘nothing’ of snow” (123). One might wonder what experiences of real snow McGann and Samuels have had that would justify this characterization of it as “nothing,” but the more important point is that the page was already mostly white space, and the additional white space of the noun-only version does not belong to Stevens’s poem at all, but only to the deformed version. Similar white space will occur in any poem in which only the nouns are printed, whether or not the poem has anything to do with whiteness, nothingness, or snow. Perhaps printing the letters and lines of Poe’s “The Raven” very close together would enhance the significance of the black type, allowing it to appear as a poetic equivalent of the physical “nothing” of the blackness of the Raven. That way lies only darkness itself, not illumination, not radiance.

McGann and Samuels also argue that their deformance shows the poem to be noun-heavy and noun-balanced, with two nouns typically appearing in each line. By their assumptions, there are twenty-seven nouns among the 107 words of the poem, and ten of the poem’s fifteen lines contain two nouns. This looks promising, a simple but effective way of focusing our attention on the nouns. Instead, the train has already left the tracks. Here is the poem with the nouns underlined that McGann and Samuels print separately and with the pronouns boldfaced:

The Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter
 Of the January sun; and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, **who** listens in the snow,
And, **nothing himself**, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

It seems odd for McGann and Samuels to call *himself* a noun here, and the same is true of the first two examples of *nothing*. (The presence of the definite article before the third *nothing* marks it as a noun. Making something out of nothing is one of the most memorable moves of the poem.) One could construct a reasonable argument for treating nouns and pronouns alike, but it would be more difficult to argue that *nothing* and *himself* should count, but not *one*, *who*, *that*, or *which*. If none of the pronouns counts as a noun, the noun-balanced nature of the poem is called into question, with only eight of the fifteen lines now having two nouns. If all of them are counted, only seven lines have two nouns. *January* would also normally be considered a noun here in spite of its adjectival use. Perhaps this underscores the subjective nature of interpretation, but this example seems more subjective than necessary.

The more important problem with this deformative exercise stems from the claim that “The Snow Man” is a noun-heavy poem. In isolation, as it stands, the claim is almost meaningless. One of the most vexed and vexing problems of stylistics has long been that a textual feature or a style can only be distinctive or unusual if it is different from what we expect. A poem can legitimately be labeled “noun-heavy” only if it has more nouns than is “normal.” But how many nouns are normal in 107 words of English, of Modern American English, or in a 107-word poem? The existence of large electronic collections of poetry has finally made a reasonably definitive answer to this question at least potentially possible, and some kind of reference to a norm seems clearly to be required: “Interpretations of texts must compare different texts and text types: otherwise we cannot know what is typical or atypical, or whether features of texts are significant, linguistically or ideologically, or not” (Stubbs 152). The same is true of whether a feature of a text is *stylistically* significant, or not. Is noun-heaviness actually a feature of “The Snow Man” at all?

I had planned to compare “The Snow Man” to a corpus of more than 2,000,000 words of poetry by twenty-five 20th-century American

poets (roughly contemporaneous with Stevens). Unfortunately, preliminary testing on several part-of-speech taggers has shown that they are not accurate enough on the poetry to be used to count the nouns without a great deal of manual correction. (One tagger makes the interesting assumption that any capitalized word not preceded by sentence punctuation is a proper noun—not a bad first approximation for prose, perhaps, but disastrous for poetry. This highlights the differences between the interpretive algorithms for poetry and prose.) However, a more modest survey done manually seems both worthwhile and necessary if McGann and Samuels’s claim is to be taken seriously (whether it need be taken seriously at all will return as an issue below). To that end, I have counted the nouns in the first, fifth, tenth, fifteenth, and twentieth 200-word subsections taken from poetry by the following twenty-five poets that is available in Chadwyk Healey’s *Literature Online* (access provided by Bobst Library, New York University):

Cawein, Madison Julius, 1865-1914
 Moody, William Vaughn, 1869-1910
 Robinson, Edwin Arlington, 1869-1935
 Crane, Stephen, 1871-1900
 Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 1872-1906
 Frost, Robert, 1874-1963
 Sandburg, Carl, 1878-1967
 Lindsay, Vachel, 1879-1931
 Stevens, Wallace, 1879-1955
 Williams, William Carlos, 1883-1963
 Teasdale, Sara, 1884-1933
 Wylie, Elinor, 1885-1928⁴
 Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972
 Kilmer, Joyce, 1886-1918
 H. D., 1886-1961
 Jeffers, Robinson, 1887-1962
 Eliot, T. S., 1888- 1965
 Millay, Edna St. Vincent, 1892-1950
 MacLeish, Archibald, 1892-1982
 Cummings, E. E., 1894-1962
 Toomer, Jean, 1894-1967
 Gregory, Horace, 1898-1982
 Crane, Hart, 1899-1932
 Williams, Oscar, 1900-1964
 Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967

I supplemented the initial counts with spot checks of five addi-

tional 200-word subsections taken from later in the samples of four of the poets, and with counts of 3,000 additional words from fifteen similarly selected 200-word subsections of Stevens's poetry. The total amount of text analyzed (32,000 words) is too small for the counts to be more than suggestive, but they are *suggestive* (see Fig. 1). Among the 107 words (tokens) of "The Snow Man," there are 25 nouns, ignoring the pronouns *nothing* and *himself*, but counting *January*, so that 23.4 percent of the words in the poem *are* nouns. For the twenty-five poets I checked, the mean percentage of nouns is 24.1 percent, and the median is 24.5 percent, suggesting that this is not a noun-heavy poem after all. Nouns are even slightly less frequent in this poem than they are in the combined sections of poetry by Stevens, who, with 24.8 percent nouns, is very close to both the mean and median percentage. "The Snow Man" is a noun-average poem, and Stevens is a noun-average poet.

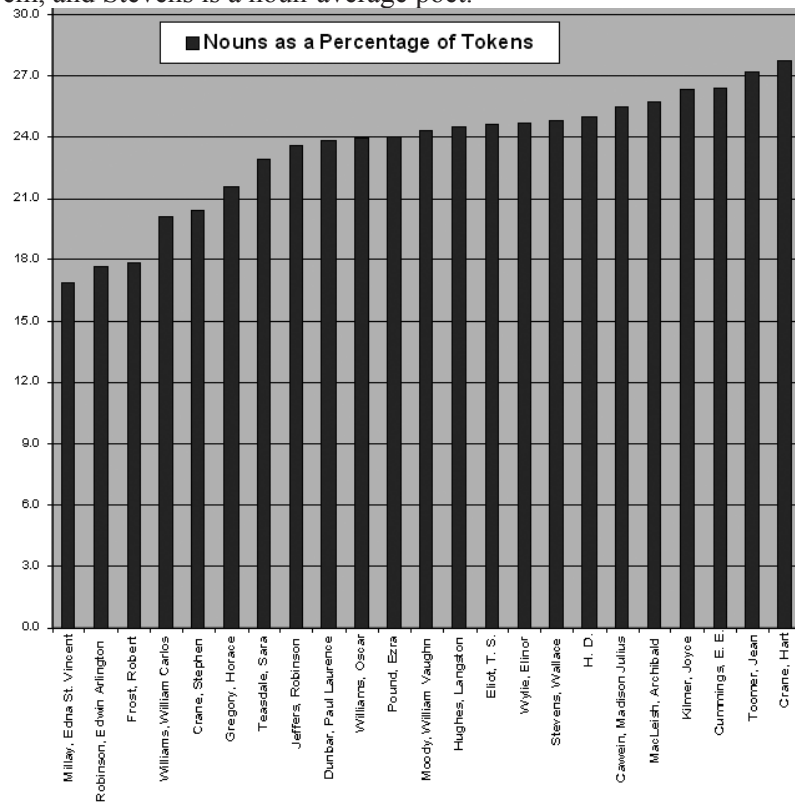


Fig. 1. The Percentage of Nouns in Twenty-Five 20th-Century American Poets

There is some evidence that this percentage of nouns is a much wider norm in “imaginative writing”; Hudson reports 23 percent nouns in the imaginative portion of the Brown corpus and 21 percent in the LOB corpus (332).

In contrast, here is Claude McKay’s powerful sonnet, “America,” with 31.8 percent nouns (35 nouns in 110 words):

America

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time’s unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

Not only does “America” have a much higher proportion of nouns than “The Snow Man,” the nouns seem more vigorous, more striking, and none is repeated. Surely this is the more noun-heavy poem of the two. Theodore Roethke surpasses McKay in his poem “To My Sister,” with 35.9 percent nouns (thirty-three nouns in ninety-two words). His nouns, like McKay’s, also seem more striking than those of “The Snow Man”:

To My Sister

O my sister remember the stars the tears the trains
The woods in spring the leaves the scented lanes
Recall the gradual dark the snow’s unmeasured fall
The naked fields the cloud’s immaculate folds
Recount each childhood pleasure: the skies of azure
The pageantry of wings the eye’s bright treasure.

Keep faith with present joys refuse to choose
Defer the vice of flesh the irrevocable choice
Cherish the eyes the proud incredible poise
Walk boldly my sister but do not deign to give
Remain secure from pain preserve thy hate thy heart.

Among the twenty-five poets in my corpus, Sandburg has the highest overall percentage of nouns, and the following excerpt from “Prairie” is extraordinarily noun-heavy, with about 40 percent nouns (about 45 nouns in 112 words, depending on the treatment of items like “Yankee Doodle”):

The running water babbled to the deer, the cottontail, the
gopher
You came in wagons, making streets and schools,
Kin of the ax and rifle, kin of the plow and horse,
Singing Yankee Doodle, Old Dan Tucker, Turkey in the
Straw,
You in the coonskin cap at a log house door hearing a lone
wolf howl,
You at a sod house door reading the blizzards and chinooks
let loose from Medicine Hat,
I am dust of your dust, as I am brother and mother
To the copper faces, the worker in flint and clay,
The singing women and their sons a thousand years ago
Marching single file the timber and the plain.

Here four nouns are repeated: *door*, *dust*, *house*, and *kin*, partly as a result of the Whitmanesque parallelism, and nouns like *cottontail*, *gopher*, *plow*, *coonskin*, *wolf*, *sod*, *blizzards*, *chinooks*, *timber*, and *plain* seem crucial to the process of establishing the prairie world of the poem.

Now that we know what some truly noun-heavy poems are like, consider Edna St. Vincent Millay’s fine noun-light poem “Interim,” with only 9.3 percent nouns in the following excerpt (10 nouns in 107 words):

There is your book, just as you laid it down,
Face to the table, --- I cannot believe
That you are gone! --- Just then it seemed to me
You must be here. I almost laughed to think

How like reality the dream had been;
Yet knew before I laughed, and so was still.
That book, outspread, just as you laid it down!
Perhaps you thought, "I wonder what comes next,
And whether this or this will be the end";
So rose, and left it, thinking to return.
Perhaps that chair, when you arose and passed
Out of the room, rocked silently a while
Ere it again was still.

Here the ten nouns seem relatively prosaic, and *book* is repeated. Clearly the conversational tone of the poem helps to reduce the percentage of nouns; Millay is less interested in things than in relationships and feelings.⁵ Although Millay's section, with 16.9 percent nouns, has the lowest percentage of nouns among the twenty-five poets, E. A. Robinson's is the second lowest, with 17.7 percent nouns, and the following excerpt from his "Captain Craig," with only 8.7 percent nouns, is extraordinarily noun-light (9 nouns in 104 words):

Next day we found the Captain wide awake,
Propped up, and searching dimly with a spoon
Through another dreary dish of chicken-broth,
Which he raised up to me, at my approach,
So fervently and so unconsciously,
That one could only laugh. He looked again
At each of us, and as he looked he frowned;
And there was something in that frown of his
That none of us had ever seen before.
"Kind friends," he said, "be sure that I rejoice
To know that you have come to visit me;
Be sure I speak with undisguised words
And earnest, when I say that I rejoice."

Here, as in Millay, nouns are not only extraordinarily scarce, the few that do occur are also relatively prosaic, and neither the poetic effect nor the interpretation of the poem relies heavily upon them.⁶

Fuller information about which nouns are frequent in modern American poetry and which are rare and about the kinds of collocations in which the nouns are found would more fully characterize the nouns in

the poems above. Terms like *vigorous*, *striking*, and *prosaic*, which I have used impressionistically above could be given much more substance and could be supported or rejected by such evidence.⁷ This kind of information would be available only from a large lemmatized and tagged corpus of American verse, but an examination of the ranked word frequency list extracted from the (unlemmatized) corpus of twentieth-century poetry mentioned above is suggestive. Examining the frequencies of all of the nouns in the poems above in the entire corpus shows that Millay and Stevens tend to use nouns that are relatively frequent in the corpus while Sandburg and McKay use nouns that are relatively infrequent.⁸ Obviously, some relatively infrequent nouns may seem prosaic, and some relatively frequent nouns may not, but there is a strong inverse correlation between frequency and strikingness.⁹

Augmented by much more information about genre norms and comparative information about other poems, McGann's provocative deformativ move can point the way toward a more fruitful examination of the language of poetry. But there is no space here to pursue the relationship between style and noun frequency, between noun frequency and other syntactic and stylistic characteristics, or between the nouns of a poem and the creation of its fictional world.¹⁰ Rather, it is time to turn to one final example of wrong-headedness: "The Alice Fallacy; or, Only God Can Make a Tree," the first chapter of *Radiant Textuality*. Richly entertaining, provocative, thoughtful, and informative, but also finally perverse, this chapter is constructed as a dialogue between Pleasure and Instruction, with observations by Footnote and Printer's Devil. It examines some crucial questions of interpretation, esthetics, and criticism in a playful way. So far, so good. Unfortunately, it finally goes too far, and the lessons it teaches are not so good.

Instruction recounts a pseudo-Socratic class discussion of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which he tries to guide his students to a reasonable understanding of the poem. (How interesting that Instruction is male and Pleasure female!) When a student misinterprets "O Attic shape!" as referring to a ghostly shape in an attic, Instruction tries to pull the interpretive process back to the word's meaning in the poem. The students revolt, arguing that the "garret" associations of *attic* (really *Attic*), are relevant, and that "This reading opens up the poem in lots of new and interesting ways" (39). Instruction is at a loss as to how to answer this argument, and resorts to calling it the "Humpty Dumpty School of Criticism," after an exchange between Humpty Dumpty and Alice, in which Alice ques-

tions “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things,” and Humpty Dumpty responds that the real question is “which is to be master.” Unable to answer his students effectively, Instruction is thrown into a tail-spin. He starts “trying to imagine new kinds of critical thinking” (40), like a homoerotic reading of Wordsworth’s

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Yes, the earth sucks and the wind blows, but sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.¹¹ And why gender the flower as male? Flowers are prototypically female: Daisy, Flora, Iris, Jasmine, Lily, Petunia, Rose, Violet.

Instruction then produces a full-fledged, though not bird-brained, travesty interpretation. He misquotes and reverses the critique of Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees” that appears in *Understanding Poetry*, where Brooks and Warren call it a “bad poem.”¹² He points out that the poem is contemporaneous with Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and appeared only a few years before Wallace Stevens’s *Harmonium*. He argues that it is actually a good modernist poem that shifts its perspective on trees in a way similar to Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” He also argues that the poem’s dedication, “For Mrs. Henry Mills Alden,” a dedication that Brooks and Warren omit, subtly prepares for a coarse sexual pun on the verb ‘to make’ in the final lines (42-49):

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

(No, I am not making this up.) Worse yet, if “Trees” really was “written out of a certain kind of male eroticism” (48), it is an incestuous kind of eroticism: according to Instruction, Mrs. Alden was Kilmer’s mother-in-law.¹³

Printer’s Devil and Footnote debate whether Instruction’s travesty performance is cynically trivial or serious, and Footnote asks, “But what if that’s the point? What if the question isn’t ‘*how* could he take himself or his ideas seriously’ but ‘*why should* he take himself or his ideas seriously’?” (50). Footnote, apparently speaking for McGann, argues as follows:

It’s Pleasure’s ideal of an erotics of reading, a move

“against interpretation.” And the move is important because of the implicit challenge he’s laying down. His criticism of “Trees” emphasizes the *rhetoric* of interpretation, so his studied triviality signals that he appreciates the difficulty of the reciprocal demand his challenge puts on us. He comes forward not as a master but as just another player. Or if he seems a master, his behavior emphasizes the mortal limits of mastery.

Second, the dialogue argues that meaning comes as acts of thinking (which may get reified into sets of ideas), and thinking comes as exchange of thought. All sorts of uncommon critical possibilities might flow from that view of things. (51)

Undeniably, an interpretation of “Trees” as a good modernist poem about God having sex with trees (or the poet having sex with poems, or with his mother-in-law) qualifies as an “uncommon critical possibility.” On the other hand, as Bertrand Russell once remarked,

Some “advanced thinkers” are of the opinion that any one who differs from the conventional opinion must be in the right. This is a delusion; if it were not, truth would be easier to come by than it is. There are infinite possibilities of error, and more cranks take up unfashionable errors than unfashionable truths (96).

Even if “The Alice Phallusy” is merely ludic/rouse, it is a costume more honored in the breech than in the observance. It tells us very little about “Trees” or “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

One of the reasons that Instructor has so much trouble is that he seems unable to defeat the suggestion that the word *attic* could have meant to Keats what it means to the student, a meaning that allows the student to link “attic shape” with *haunts* and (a pun on) *overwrought* in the ode. Perhaps this is technically true; the *OED*’s first citation of the word in its modern sense comes from Byron’s *Beppo* (1817), four years before Keats’s death (“attic”), and Keats never uses the word elsewhere in his poetry, according to a web concordance to his poetical works (Watt), so that we cannot appeal to his “normal” usage. But in the context of the rest of this poem about a Grecian/Attic urn, with its densely archaic diction

(*who canst thus express; What maidens loth?; ye soft pipes; Lead'st thou that heifer; thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; etc.*), it is not necessary or advisable to take the “garret” meaning seriously, or to apologize for teaching students that they should not take it seriously.

One thing all interpreters of literature (and life) need to learn is the importance of discarding inappropriate interpretations—those that result from private associations, adventitious connections, and changes in the meanings of words over time. A classic example is Yeats’s use of *gay* in “Lapis Lazuli”:

I have heard that hysterical women say
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
Of poets that are always gay (891)

I have used these lines subversively in several English usage exercises to test the reactions of graduate students to Yeats’s use of *that* for people. When I ask them to comment on it without attribution in the sentence, “Some hysterical women say that they are sick of poets that are always gay,” many of them correct the sentence to “sick of poets who are always gay” or to “sick of gay poets.” Many also object to what they perceive as the homophobia of the sentence. Perhaps Instruction would find this reading liberating. Perhaps it suggests a new understanding of Yeats’s relationship with Maude Gonne. Perhaps Kilmer was really having sex with his father-in-law and was using the dedication to “Trees” as a blind. Many of his poems are dedicated to men, after all. And why did he call himself “Joyce”? Take a look at a picture of Kilmer and imagine a wig and lipstick. This game (The Ivan Ho game?) is just too easy to play.

The problem with interpretation is not that literature needs to be opened up “in lots of new and interesting ways.” On the contrary, interpretation requires new, interesting, and *reasonable* ways of constraining the wide array of possible meanings that literary texts typically make at least marginally possible. Instruction instead uses the bare possibility that in 1820 *attic* could have meant ‘garret’ to embark on a wild orgy of subjectivity and self-indulgence. But he was already of Humpty Dumpty’s company without knowing it, for the exchange between Humpty Dumpty and Alice that he discusses does not (quite) come from *Alice in Wonderland*, as he claims, but rather from *Through the Looking Glass*. And having the student argue, apparently successfully, that “Humpty Dumpty is not talking foolishness” (38) when he tells Alice that glory means ‘a nice knock-down

argument' goes to the heart of the problem. If that is not foolishness (wickedly pregnant foolishness, with its philosophical aside on nominalism), then perhaps God *is* having sex with trees (or the poet with "Trees"?).¹⁴

By overemphasizing and valorizing the undeniable subjectivity of interpretation, Instruction seems to invite and even encourage sloppy thinking and careless argument. If flashy rhetoric leading to uncommon critical possibilities is the goal, there is no need to pay much attention to the poem itself. And this has been all too much the story of the criticism of recent decades. Perhaps "The Alice Fallacy" is intended to force readers to reexamine the problems of interpretation, validity, triviality, seriousness, pleasure, and instruction, but this lesson, unlike the ludic one, is itself easy to miss or misinterpret, and Wimsatt and Beardsley are spinning in their graves. Another passage from *Through the Looking Glass* can be adapted to make my point:

"I'm sure I didn't mean—" Instruction was beginning, but Neo-Formalism interrupted him impatiently.

"That's just what I complain of! You *should* have meant! What do you suppose is the use of interpretation without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning—and an interpretation's more important than a joke, I hope. You couldn't deny that, even if you tried with both hands." (319)

I want to conclude with a different kind of text alteration, a focused alteration of Kilmer's "Trees" that is not intended to free the poem up for "uncommon new critical possibilities," but rather to investigate how the poem works, and does not work. We should begin with "the poem itself," but this is not as easy as might be expected: "Trees" really does not seem to be self-identical. Given that only the 1938 edition of Brooks and Warren appears in McGann's bibliography, one might expect the poem he prints to come from that book, except that he indicates that he is reinserting the dedication that Brooks and Warren omit. No edition of Kilmer's poems is specifically mentioned in the text, but McGann's reference to its publication at the same time as *Tender Buttons*, and the presence in his bibliography of the 1914 editions of both *Tender Buttons* and Kilmer's *Trees and Other Poems* strongly suggests the latter as the source of the epigraph. But this little poem is remarkably unstable in lines three, four, five, and seven. The version McGann prints is as follows:

Trees

(For Mrs. Henry Mills Alden)

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Kilmer's 1914 version has *earth's sweet* rather than *sweet earth's* in line four, and has the title as *TREES*, and *THINK* and a drop capital for *I* in line one (19).¹⁵ McGann's (mis)reading is also found in the 1938 edition of Brooks and Warren (387); the 1950 edition (274) and the 1960 edition (287-88) have *earth's sweet*. However, all three editions of Brooks and Warren have the title and *think* as in McGann's version, *pressed* rather than *prest* in line three, and all print *summer* in lowercase in line seven (all three also list Kilmer's 1914 edition of the poem in their acknowledgments). In addition, the second and third editions print *to God* rather than *at God* in line five. McGann's text matches the one printed in Untermeyer's well known *Modern American Poetry*, except that Untermeyer has *summer* in lowercase (391).¹⁶ A further complication is that, despite McGann's alteration of Brooks and Warren, the content and wording of the critique show that he is quoting from the 1960 edition, in which the discussion of the poem is shorter than and quite different from the one in the 1938 edition (the discussion in the 1950 edition is different again, but is also longer than the one in the 1960 edition). These instabilities seem

much more interesting and puzzling than any arising from the scanning experiment: McGann's text matches no printed version I have seen, and matches neither the edition of Brooks and Warren that he cites, nor the one from which he quotes, nor the edition of Kilmer's poem that he cites. The instabilities in the poem do not significantly alter its interpretation, but they do suggest that the self-identity of texts is always under pressure, if not necessarily for the reasons McGann claims.

Now to the focused alteration. As insufferable as the critique of this poem by Brooks and Warren sometimes is, their central charge of incoherence seems well founded. Yet the incoherence is not limited to the inconsistency of Kilmer's TREE = WOMAN metaphor throughout the poem. The initial praise of trees as "lovely" also has very little to do with the rest of the poem. The stanza about the tree wearing a nest of robins in her hair is the only one that is more than vaguely related to the appearance of trees, and the more generic meaning of "excellent, delightful" for *lovely* does not seem obviously appropriate either, especially because of the emphasis on vision in line one, an emphasis that seems more likely to be accidental than intentional (are poems visually lovely?). Furthermore, the inability of poets to create trees, with which the poem ends, also seems to have nothing to do with loveliness, and seems undercut by the poetic, artificial nature of the various metaphoric characterizations of trees, which are, after all, created by the poet (the 1950 edition of Brooks and Warren has the fullest discussion of these issues).

One way to address the problems in the poem is to praise trees not for their loveliness, but for their variety (as McGann suggests in facetiously comparing the poem to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black-bird"), and this can be accomplished simply by changing "as lovely as a tree" to "as various as a tree." The adjective is not very attractive, however, and the change creates some fault lines because the variety suggested by the images is difficult to attach to a single tree. The two alterations below go progressively farther:

Trees

(For Mr. Joyce Kilmer)

I think no poem will ever be
As multifarious as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth seems pressed
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

Might also look at God all day,
Or lift her leafy arms to pray.

A tree who may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair,

Though on her bosom snow has lain,
May intimately live with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Trees

(For Mr. Joyce Kilmer)

I think that poems will never please
In half so many ways as trees.

If one tree's hungry mouth is pressed
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

Another looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray.

If one tree may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair,

On one tree's bosom snow has lain;
One intimately lives with rain.

Poets may write such lines as these,
But God alone created trees.

The original has been made coherent by changing the characteristic of trees that is praised from loveliness to variety while leaving as much of the language and structure intact as possible. As always happens, one

change in a poem prompts others, and the disruptions of the original reveal structures, sounds, and meanings that might otherwise be overlooked. (In general, the better the poem, the more pronounced the effects.) One difficulty with the two versions above is that euphonious adjectives meaning “various” are not easy to find. Another is that mere variety does not seem particularly praiseworthy, and what variety there is seems to lie more in the poetic perceptions of trees than in the trees themselves. About the actual differences among trees the poem is silent. This means that the final stanza continues to be problematic, for the various views of trees are now even more obviously those created by a poet.

In the hands of a great poet, the praise of variety involves meticulous attention to things like “a brinded cow” and the “stippling” of the “rose moles” on trout. Although “Trees” is no “Pied Beauty,” it seems fitting to mention Hopkins’s poem, given the comment by Miriam A. Kilmer (Joyce Kilmer’s granddaughter) that “It is as an editor that his most important contributions to poetry were made; my father particularly credited him with the literary recognition of Gerard Manley Hopkins in the United States.” Presumably this is a reference to Kilmer’s 1917 *Dreams and Images: An Anthology of Catholic Poets*, which contains Hopkins’s “Spring,” “The Habit of Perfection,” and “The Starlight Night.”¹⁷ Another tantalizing fact is that Kilmer wrote a poem to Hopkins, “Father Gerard Hopkins, S. J.” (Holliday).

A different kind of alteration reinterprets the poem backward from the final couplet:

Trees

(For Mr. Joyce Kilmer)

Though poems may inspire us,
A tree is far more marvelous.

One poet’s tree in Summer wears
A nest of robins in her hair;

Another’s hungry mouth is pressed
Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast;

Another looks at God all day,

And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

On one tree's bosom snow has lain;
One intimately lives with rain;

We poets sing such poems as these,
But God's command created trees.

Here, though the creative acts of poets may inspire by producing poetic descriptions of trees, the poet's achievement pales in comparison with God's achievement in creating the trees themselves. The adjective *marvelous* is still rather vague, but at least it avoids any inappropriate suggestion of visual beauty. This version emphasizes the relationship between speech and creation, and the lack of concrete detail heightens the contrast between the solid reality of trees and the mere verbal nature of "Trees." The poem becomes self-consciously self-referential.

Another way of approaching the incoherence of the poem is to remove the explicitly pious religious sentiment and choose characteristics of trees to praise that are more concrete and specific and less metaphoric and anthropomorphic, characteristics that the next version sums up as marvelous and wondrous:

Trees

(For Mr. Joyce Kilmer)

Though poems may inspire us,
A tree is far more marvelous.

A tree whose mouthless leaves drink rain,
And breathe the foul air clean again;

A tree that towering massive there
Is captured sunlight, earth, and air;

A tree whose roots break rocks apart;
Who pumps its blood without a heart;
Within whose living trunk are rings
That saw the births of Egypt's kings.

Poems may sing, and mean, and *be*,
But none's as wondrous as a tree.

Here palpable facts about the respiration, size, physical structure, growth, and age of trees make them seem marvelous and wondrous, rather than poetic descriptions of them. Because the basic contrast between poems and trees of the original has been retained, this version remains self-referential, but here the focus has shifted toward the trees and away from poetry. The contrast between this version and Kilmer's original reinforces the primary nature of the religious impulse behind his poem, in which the loveliness of the tree is asserted as a reason to praise God as a creator of trees, and to emphasize man's humbler powers of creation. As Kilmer comments in the introduction to his anthology of Catholic verse, "The poet sees things hidden from other men, but he sees them only in dreams. A poet is (by the very origin of the word) a maker, but a maker of images, not a creator of life" (n.p.). Further alterations are possible in almost any direction. Despite the similarity in structure between this version and the original, however, we have almost left interpretation behind. It is time to return.

In the 1950 "Postscript" to their "Letter to the Teacher," Brooks and Warren sound more like McGann than one might expect. Indeed, the postscript and letter are valuable documents for any student of literature, and they are especially valuable for anyone who has grown up among claims that New Criticism consciously rejected historical context and biographical study. Like McGann, Brooks and Warren reject "official" readings and insist that the reader and the poem exist in

a perpetual dialectic. For this reason the process of criticism is a never-ending process. It cannot exhaust the good poem or the good poet. This means more criticism, not less. But it ought to mean a criticism constantly returning to the object and constantly refining itself by fresh appeals to intuition and perception. (*Understanding Poetry* [1950] xxiii)

I endorse these words, which remind me of Leo Spitzer's philological circle (30), but I would add that when critics return to the poem to refine their interpretations, they would be wise to bring along some tools that can aid perception and sharpen and correct intuition. Some of the most

useful tools have been mentioned above: text analysis, corpora, linguistic stylistics, empirical studies of reader response, and focused text alteration. And still others, such as computer-assisted thematic analysis and statistical stylistics, are increasingly being used to good effect.

I conclude with an interpretive travesty of my own:

Trees

(For Mr. Joyce Kilmer)

He thinks that he will never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

But poems charm and poems please,
And many are lovelier than "Trees."

A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast,

Can hardly look at God all day,
While lifting leafy arms to pray.

Where are her eyes, mouth, arms, and head?
Perhaps she lifts her legs instead.

Can that same tree in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair?

Perhaps her arms (or legs?) are hairy.
A tree like that should make one wary.

That bosom on which snow has lain?
You'll search a tree for it in vain.

Unless . . . a hairy bosom too?
That tree belongs inside a zoo.
One line is good. I can't complain
Of "intimately lives with rain."

Bad poems persist; they sadden me.
Not even God could make *that* tree.

Notes

¹ An electronic form of McGann's discussion with images of the periodical page that was scanned and images of the various results appears on the web as Rethinking Textuality.

² Following my normal practice and without intentional irony, I collected this quotation and most of the others in this article by scanning and OCR—to avoid typing errors.

³ The meaning of a hyphen at the end of a line is sometimes uncertain in some texts. For example, some American novels published around 1900 contain some examples of the word *today* with a hyphen between *to* and *day* and some without a hyphen. When the word also appears hyphenated across a line break, it is impossible to know which way to read it, though the difference is not very important, and may well not be authorial. There are no examples of this kind of indeterminacy in the text under discussion.

⁴ Because there are only eighteen full 200-word sections in the sample from Wylie's poetry, the eighteenth was counted rather than the twentieth.

⁵ The relationship between the register of a text and the frequency of various linguistic features has been studied extensively by Douglas Biber, who shows that conversation is typically much lower in nouns than academic prose, for example, with 13.7 percent and 18.8 percent nouns in his corpus, respectively (Biber, *Dimensions* 60; see also Biber, *Variation*).

⁶ In a fuller analysis with larger samples, statistical tests would be used to decide whether or not the differences in percentages of nouns are likely to have occurred by chance. I note here simply that the percentages of nouns in the samples from Millay, Robinson, and Frost are more than 1.7 standard deviations below the mean, and the percentage in Sandburg is more than 2.4 standard deviations above the mean.

⁷ For an investigation of foregrounding that demonstrates a remarkable degree of consistency among readers in judgments of what words in poems are striking, important, and worth discussing, see van Peer (28-51, 97-126).

⁸ Several of the nouns in these poems are indistinguishable in form from other parts of speech; for example, *might* is a noun in McKay's "America," but it is only rarely a noun and much more frequently an auxiliary verb in the corpus. Because of this, I have tested my claim in three different ways: first by including all the nouns from the poems, whether or not they may represent other parts of speech in the corpus, second by deleting any nouns that have obvious homophones, and finally by deleting both nouns with obvious homophones and the most frequent noun in each text (a single extremely frequent noun like *life*, *day*, or *time* can result in a misleadingly high mean frequency for the nouns in a poem).

⁹ Although it is not obvious in the examples above, another curious fact about noun-heavy and noun-light poems is a strong tendency for the frequency of personal pronouns to vary inversely with the frequency of nouns. McKay's "America" includes only seven personal pronouns (not counting possessives), Roethke's "To My Sister" none at all, and Sandburg's "Prairie" only five, while Robinson's "Captain Craig" has fifteen and Millay's "Interim" has nineteen (note the importance of "I" and "you" in Millay). Hudson notes that this is true in the Brown and LOB corpora as well (332-38).

¹⁰ On text-world creation, see Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*; Werth, *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*; Semino, *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts*; and Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction*.

¹¹ The crude 'fellate' meaning of *blow* dates only from 1933, but it seems unlikely that Instruction would consider that relevant ("blow").

¹² McGann does not explicitly cite Kilmer or Brooks and Warren, but his bibliography includes the 1914 edition of Kilmer's *Trees and other Poems* and the 1938 edition of Brooks and Warren.

¹³ The "seduce" meaning of *make*, first cited from 1910, is barely possible historically, though none of the citations from before Kilmer's death in 1918 seem to suggest actual sexual acts ("make").

¹⁴ Lewis Carroll, like Humpty Dumpty, was a nominalist in logical matters, holding that the stipulation of meaning for words to be used is perfectly reasonable. However, as Martin Gardner points out in his notes, "[I]f we wish to communicate accurately we are under a kind of moral obligation to avoid Humpty's practice of giving private meanings to commonly used words" (270). He also quotes Roger Holmes, who asks, "May we . . . make our words mean whatever we choose them to mean? . . . Do we have an obligation to past usage? In one sense words are our masters, or communication would be impossible. In another we are the masters; otherwise there could be no poetry" (270).

¹⁵ The 1914 edition differs slightly from the poem's original 1913 publication in *Poetry*, where the title appears uppercase, there is no special typography for *I think* in line one, and, most importantly, there is no dedication.

¹⁶ I have seen only the 1936 edition; however, *THINK* appears as in the original but the title has only an initial capital in the 1919 edition, available at www.bartleby.com/104/119.html.

¹⁷ I have seen only a later edition (Kilmer, *Joyce Kilmer's Anthology of Catholic Poets*), but its preface states that "No omissions from or additions to Kilmer's original selections have been made in reprinting the first unit; here are his friends and favorites as he noted them in 1917" (n.p.).

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