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Deformance and Interpretation

Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann

With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*¹

I have often noticed that we are inclined to endow our friends with the stability of type that literary characters acquire in the reader's mind. No matter how many times we reopen "King Lear," never shall we find the good king banging his tankard in high revelry, all woes forgotten, at a jolly reunion with all three daughters and their lapdogs. Never will Emma rally, revived by the sympathetic salts in Flaubert's father's timely tear. Whatever revolution this or that popular character has gone through between the book covers, his fate is fixed in our minds, and, similarly, we expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them. Thus X will never compose the immortal music that would clash with the second-rate symphonies he has accustomed us to. Y will never commit murder. Under no circumstances can Z ever betray us. We have it all arranged in our minds, and the less often we see a particular person the more satisfying it is to check how obediently he conforms to our notion of him every time we hear of him. Any deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*²

I. A Question of Interpretation

WORKS OF IMAGINATION encourage interpreters, who respond in diverse and inventive ways. The variety of critical practices—indeed, the number of differing interpretations directed at the same works—can obscure the theoretical commonality that holds those practices together. We can draw an immediate distinction, however,

between critical practices which do or do not aim to be interpretive: bibliographical studies and prosodic analysis, for example, typically discount their interpretive moves, if any are explicitly engaged.

The usual object of interpretation is "meaning," or some set of ideas that can be cast in thematic form. These meanings are sought in different ways: as though resident "in" the work, or evoked through "reader-response," or deconstructable through a process that would reinstall a structure of intelligibility at a higher, more critical level. The contemporary terminology will not obscure the long-standing character of such practices, which can be mixed in various ways. In all these cases, however, an essential relation is preserved between an artistic work and some structure of ideas, that is, some conceptual form that gets more or less fully articulated "for" the work. To understand a work of art, interpreters try to close with a structure of thought that represents its essential idea(s).

In this paper we want to propose—or recall—another way of engaging imaginative work. Perhaps as ancient as more normative practices, it has been less in vogue for some time. This alternative does not stand opposed to interpretive procedures as such, nor to the elaboration of conceptual equivalents for imaginative work. But it does try to set these modes of exegesis on a new footing. The alternative moves to break beyond conceptual analysis into the kinds of knowledge involved in performative operations—a practice of everyday imaginative life. We will argue that concept-based interpretation, reading along thematic lines, is itself best understood as a particular type of performative and rhetorical operation.

II. Reading Backward

In an undated fragment on a leaf of stationery, Emily Dickinson wrote what appears to be one of her "letters to the world": "Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes (often have, many times) have—a Something overtakes the Mind" (Prose Fragment 30).³ In the light of recent promotions of "antithetical" reading models, we might find Dickinson's idea a compatible one. But the physical and performative character of her proposal sets it in a tradition of reading and criticism far different from those we have cultivated in the twentieth century. This difference is exactly why we should listen to what she is saying.

Most "antithetical" reading models operate in the same orbit as the critical practices they seek to revise: when critics and scholars offer to "read," or reread, a poem, they hold out the promise of an interpreta-

tion. The model for this time-honored procedure is well illustrated in a work like Dante's *Convivio*, which has been so influential for later critical and academic procedures. Dante explains four of his canzoni according to his well-known scheme of four-fold and leveled interpretation. These explanations implicitly represent what he elsewhere and frequently calls the poem's *ragionamento*—its thematic content, which can be explicated apart from the ornamental and rhetorical forms comprising the other aspect of poetical making.

But the *Convivio* is not only a model of thematized interpretation: when we recall its rhetorical context we see a very different dynamic at work. That context exposes the *Convivio* as one of our best and earliest examples of reading "backward" within an interpretive tradition (as opposed to Dickinson's performative tradition). Book II of Dante's prose work supplies a reading of his canzone "Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete." Part of that reading involves an interpretation of another of Dante's poems, the canzone "Gentil pensero che parla di vui," which formed part of *La Vita Nuova*'s narrative ten years before the *Convivio*. In his early programmatic autobiography the canzone seems to deal with a personal crisis involving Dante and various real people. The *Convivio* brings forward a different view of the canzone, however, and of *La Vita Nuova* in general. The poem, Dante tells us in the *Convivio*, is not what *La Vita Nuova* makes it appear to be; the text bears a secret meaning within its surface appearances.

We have to manage a double reversal here. First, Dante says that the key figure in the canzone is not what people thought. The lady he saw gazing at him from a window, whose beauty eclipsed his devotion to Beatrice, is an allegorical construction, not a real woman. She is the focus of Dante's pursuit of Truth, the Lady Philosophy. In the *Convivio*'s reading she is represented as a wholly positive figure.

Her virtue defines the *Convivio*'s second reversal of meaning. In *La Vita Nuova* Dante's attraction to this lady of the window appears a kind of relapse from his love for Beatrice. However one interprets the point of this relapse, the narrative of *La Vita Nuova* moves on to show Dante recovering his former devotion to Beatrice. But in the *Convivio* he returns to that earlier writing scene to argue an interpretation he knows will startle his readers, so different does it seem from that given in *La Vita Nuova*. The *Convivio* argues that the lady of the window came into his life to escort Dante beyond his Beatricean devotions to a set of even more exalted pursuits. In terms of his work as a poet, philosophical poetry replaces what Dante called in a related canzone "the sweet songs of love."

This kind of moral or conceptual reclamation of imaginative work is fundamental to what we learn and teach in our schools. Less critical

methods—Walter Pater called them “Appreciations”—do not try to move against the work’s original grain, as Dante does here. Nonetheless, both critical and appreciative interpretation promote some kind of intellectual or theoretical agenda. Emily Dickinson’s thought is different. When she talks of reading poems backward she is thinking of recitation, whether silent or articulated. She proposes that an intellectual “overtaking” may come if one recites a poem from end to beginning, last line to first line (or is it last word to first word?).

Implicit in her proposal is a romantic apprehension: that the rhetorical power of a work of art will ultimately work against itself, dulling our sense of its own freshness. Dante’s re-readings develop from a different ground altogether. For him a poem has a determinate conceptual intelligibility, and while one may mistake it, or grasp it partially or inadequately, it nonetheless subsists, just as a transcendently intelligible Word subsists behind or within all creation. Dickinson, however, dwelt not in the intelligible but in the *possible*, as she famously observed. In such an existence, intelligibility is the consequence of a poetic action and ideas are forms or fields of experiment.

In this perspective, the critical and interpretive question is not “what does the poem mean?” but “how do we release or expose the poem’s possibilities of meaning?” Dickinson’s reading proposal has nothing to say about “meaning” at all, new or old. Her thought, her *idea*, is not a reimagined meaning but a project for reconstituting the work’s aesthetic form, as if a disordering of one’s senses of the work would make us dwellers in possibility. In offering this proposal Dickinson recognizes the uncommonness of her thought—this is the point of her rhetorical question—but she seems willing to believe that the thought may be entertained. Poems, after all, are not transmitters of information, and if we usually read them in a linear mode, we know that they also (and simultaneously) move in complex recursive ways. Tennyson wrote of their strange diagonals. For Dickinson, a conception like “the poem itself” obscures not only how poetry functions but how language itself is constituted. For her, as all her letters and poetical writings show, language is an interactive medium. Moving backward through a poem, we expose its reciprocal inertias in performative and often startling ways.

We use Dickinson’s proposal for reading poems backward, then, as an emblem for rethinking our resources of interpretation. It is a splendid model for what we would call deformative criticism. Her procedure, as we have suggested, follows from a romantic awareness, famously articulated by Shelley among many others, that poems lose their vital force when they succumb to familiarization. Dickinson’s is a proto-modernist strategy of estrangement. But while we recognize her affinity with these traditional lines of aesthetic modernity, we should not lose sight of the

difference. Dickinson's critical model is performative, not intellectual. Indeed, in an important sense it is antitheoretical: not because it is opposed to theory (that is, speculative thought), but because it places theory in a subordinated relation to practice.⁴ In this respect her proposal recalls what Blake says about the difference between a Swedenborg and a Shakespeare, between Dante and his interpreters. For Blake the exegete is an "Angel," a "Philosopher." Either pitiful or presumptuous in Blake's eyes, such exegetes lift intellectual candles before the suns of vision.⁵

III. Interpretation as Performance: The Case of Dante, the Coda of Shelley

Blake's contempt for the "Cunning & Morality" of interpreters, however radically they present themselves, defines his artist's response to forms of conceptual or thematic interpretation. His life's work was an imaginative argument—an argument mounted in works of imagination—against all nonperformative styles of interpretation. Interpretation of works of imagination called for responsive works of imagination, not reflexive works of analysis. While Dickinson certainly thinks and works in the same spirit, her comment about Reading Backward introduces an interesting and important variation. Reading Backward is a deformative as well as a performative program. It recollects the argument that her contemporary, Humpty Dumpty, threw in Alice's face to unhinge her conventional imagination of language.

Recalling that Dante himself was engaged in a thoroughgoing poetical deformation, we too might ask Humpty Dumpty's question: who is to be master—the later Dante or the earlier? This is not a question to be settled with an answer; its point is gained when the question is put. The later Dante argued that he was to be master, and he argued further that mastery lay in an interpretation directed toward thematic and philosophical goals, rather than to affective and stylistic purposes. But according to both Dante's and Humpty Dumpty's views of the matter, mastery comes through rhetoric, in the acts of formation and deformation that Dante carried out, early as well as late. The significance of the *Convivio* lies less in the ideas it proposes than in the execution of the proposals, and in the imaginative overthrow that bears them violently along and away. The *Convivio* does not deconstruct but instead deforms *La Vita Nuova*, which is forced to take on meanings of which it was not originally possessed. In this respect the critical work treats the autobiography to the same kind of deformation that *La Vita Nuova* visited upon poems like "A ciascun alma presa," written by Dante years

before the autobiography or the events it recounts but placed in the text as if it were involved in *La Vita Nuova*'s immediacies.

Here we observe instruments of expression functioning in performative, and often deformative, ways. Poetical works regularly operate in such ways. Prose, on the other hand, has come to appear a genre of transparency, as if it might be made a vehicle of noise-free information transmission or information-representation. Working in that spirit, the *Convivio* means to set down the *ragionamento* of poems like "Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete." We do not have to deconstruct Dante's text in order to see that this *ragionamento*—its meaning and its information—is riven with discrepancies that will outface each other for ever.

Coming before the historical period when prose gained its scientific function, the *Convivio* is especially important: for it is also the work that models and licenses many of our most basic hermeneutic procedures. The force of its interpretive desire is so great, and has been so successful, that it still imbues our own most common interpretive modes.⁶ Dickinson's reading proposal discovers its special importance in this situation. For if we *believe* Dante's arguments in the *Convivio* (rather than give them our most serious attention), all forms of *poiesis* are threatened with prose possession. Reading Backward short circuits the sign of prose transparency and reinstalls the text—any text, prose or verse—as a performative event, a made thing. In so far as Dickinson's verse does make a connection to prose discourse, it embeds itself in highly personal and idiosyncratic prose textures—in personal letters and diaristic scriptures, like the notation on Reading Backward. Of course Dickinson is not a better or worse writer or thinker because she lacks Dante's passion for *ragionamento*, or for meaning that can be systematically articulated. She is just different. But her difference can help us recover a new (or perhaps renascent) appreciation of Dante's work, which is after all poetical, not philosophical (systematic or otherwise).

Recall again, for example, that in his later life Dante reserved the critical function of *poiesis* for work that sought moral and political goals: the *rime petrose* and the *Commedia* search and revise the "sweet songs of youth." This change of view in Dante is not, however, a change in basic critical (that is to say, poetical) method. He is looking at his work from a new angle. *La Vita Nuova* itself, as we noted, involves a critical translation of texts written earlier. This method, if it can be so called, suffuses the writing practice of Dante and his late thirteenth-century circle. When these poets wrote exegeses of contemporary work, they commonly chose verse as their critical form. The opening sonnet of *La Vita Nuova* explicitly calls for the "true interpretation and kind thought" of other poets. The call is an interesting one to make: why should Dante want his fellow poets to interpret his dream and its related sonnet? What

could they have to say that would clarify the strange vision that opens the narrative of Dante's autobiography?

The readings they gave, the sonnets on Dante's initial sonnet that descend to us, do not settle such questions but instead complicate them. Cavalcante, Cino, and Dante da Maiano, who wrote the best-known interpretations, all take a different view—as we might expect, as Dante himself might have expected. But perhaps those differentials signal the critical point: that meaning is more a dynamic exchange than a discoverable content, and that the exchange is best revealed as a play of differences. Indeed, the exchange gets exposed most fully in forms that are as self-alienated and nontransparent as Dante's beseeching sonnet. And we want to remember that the sonnet itself does not pretend to possess its own meaning. Meaning is what it goes in search of.

Dante never doubts that if a poem has been properly made its structure and conceptual content can be cast into a prose description and paraphrase. His thought is clearly stated in the *Convivio*, but it is implicit as well in the regular formal descriptions he gives in *La Vita Nuova* after each of the interpolated poems. The question then arises: why write in poetry at all, and especially why write intellectual and philosophical poetry? Dante's answer is classical: verse adds delight and pleasure to instruction. Even in the *rime petrose*, we ask? And the answer is yes, even there, although the pleasures of the later texts come in more severe and often more abstracted forms.

Dante's thought is Thomistic and Aristotelian: "nihil est in intellectu quod non prius est in sensu."⁷ This priority is not temporal but logical, and perhaps ontological. In *poiesis*, the physique of language forms a dialectic with the text's *ragionamento*, the dialectic of pleasure and instruction. Even were it to be executed to perfection, however, the dialectic involves only human perfections. Dante understands that his work is supervened. The poem's action takes place within an encompassing "love that moves the sun and the other stars." Consequently, the intellectual "content" of a poem, if it must be paraphrasable to have any authority whatever, cannot be imagined a final thought. If it is also a mastering thought (and for Dante it is), it functions in a Humpty Dumpty mode. The poem's *ragionamento* is regularly exposed to its human limits through a formal devotion to the artifices of surprising pleasures. Paradoxically, then, this structure of pleasure works to draw the intellect beyond what it is able to imagine. In this sense, the elementary, linguistic pleasure of verse becomes the manifest form of divine presence. Dante sees that presence as Beatrice when he is young, and as Lady Philosophy when he is older: *dolce stil novo* as against *rime petrose*.

Dante's approach to the performative knowledge of *poiesis* is far

removed from Dickinson's or Lewis Carroll's, and the latter read backward and upside-down at a very different historical moment. The turn of *poiesis* from performance to deformance marks an epoch when Dantean *ragionamento*, the dream vision of enlightenment, had grown vexed to scientific nightmare. No one exposes this turn of events better than Shelley, whose allegiance to Dante's visionary hopes is unmistakable. When his friend Thomas Love Peacock put the case for a new kind of instrumental knowledge, scientific rather than poetical, Shelley responded—twice, in fact: once in prose, a second time in verse. The prose response is well known:

We have more moral, political, and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practise. . . . The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best. . . . But we let '*I dare not wait upon I would*, like the poor cat i' the adage.' We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionately circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.⁸

This is a Dantean and not a Kantian thought about poetry, but the "Defense" is replete with Dante's ideas and expressions. If its rhetoric proved merely beautiful and ineffectual at the flood tide of rationalist ideology, it may strike late twentieth-century readers very differently. In any case, it helps us to see that a continuity of thought about *poiesis*, knowing, and action stretches between Dante's enthusiasms and Dickinson's extremities.

Shelley's place in that line is perhaps even more clear in the verse text that goes with the "Defense": the coded narrative of *Epipsychidion*, written just after he finished his prose treatise. The poem lays bare the ambiguous truth of the "Defense" by staging it as a performance rather than arranging it as an exposition of ideas. As in Dante's work, *Epipsychidion* clarifies what it knows by becoming what it beholds. The prefatory "Advertisement" for the poem explicitly locates it in relation to *La Vita Nuova*. More than that, Shelley lets us know that his "version" of *La Vita Nuova* is the work Dante reconstituted through the *Convivio*'s interpretation of "Voi ch' intendendo il terzo ciel movete." Shelley puts his free translation of the last strophe of Dante's canzone at the head of his poem, making what he calls a "presumptuous application" of Dante's work to his own. Thence unfolds Shelley's quasi-autobiographical reprise on *La Vita Nuova*—partly fictive, partly factive, as the "Advertise-

ment" makes so clear, but in all cases thoroughly allegoristic. The poem is only superficially a veiled series of biographical anecdotes. What Shelley has made is an argument, as the title explicitly says, "on the subject of the soul." That is to say, it is an argument about the soul's desire, or Love. More to the point, it is an argument addressed from and to persons who perceive the frustration of desire as a function of social circumstances and institutions.

No poem of Shelley's has been judged more recondite. To his admirers it is perhaps his most beautiful work, to his detractors his most ineffectual. And both judgments are not only persuasive but also underscore the poem's performative character. *Epipsychidion* is a love poem that realizes a dysfunction between desire and action. It imagines what it knows, and what it knows it represents in and as itself: that is, both the rule of this dysfunction and the unachieved desire to overcome it. The initial setting of the poem's action—"the noble and unfortunate lady . . . now imprisoned in [a] convent"—occasions an intense symbolic elaboration. The unfolding poem does not alter those imaginary circumstances; it fulfills them.

IV. From Performance to Deformance

The foregoing discussion underscores two matters of special importance for our purposes. First, imaginative work has an elective affinity with performance: it is organized as rhetoric and *poiesis* rather than as exposition and information-transmission. Because this is so, it always lies open to deformative moves. Harold Bloom's trenchant theory of poetic influence spelled out some of the imagination's performative "ratios," as he called them. Certain of these ratios are aggressively deformative, as when Blake famously overturns both Milton's *Paradise Lost* and its chief precursor, the Judeo-Christian Bible, or when Ronald Johnson selects from and revises *Paradise Lost* in *RADI OS* (1977).

What we have written here, however, is neither performative nor deformative; it is expository. And this fact raises a second matter of importance: that criticism (scholarship as well as interpretation) tends to imagine itself as an informative rather than a deformative activity. In the last section of this essay we shall address the informatics of criticism with a view toward shifting what we take to be the customary understanding of such work. Here we want to point out that lines of performative and deformative critical activity have always existed. Editions and translations are by definition performative. Elaborate scholarly editions foreground their performative characteristics, and sometimes translators do the same.

Let us briefly consider two examples of these critical performatives, simply to clarify what we mean when we say that editions and translations are *prima facie* performative. The first example is the Kane-Donaldson edition of the B Text of *Piers Plowman*, which its editors describe as “a theoretical structure, a complex hypothesis designed to account for a body of phenomena in the light of knowledge about the circumstances which generated them.”⁹ Lee Patterson’s acute comments expose the performative status of meaning in this scholarly work:

As a system, this edition validates each individual reading in terms of every other reading, which means that if some of these readings are correct, then—unless the editorial principles have been in an individual instance misapplied—they must all be correct. This is not to say that the edition is invulnerable, only that criticism at the level of counter example . . . is inconsequential. . . . Indeed, the only way [criticism] could be effective would be if [it] were part of a sustained effort to provide a contrary hypothesis by which to explain the phenomena—to provide, in other words, another edition.¹⁰

That is to say, the “theoretical” arguments and interpretive demonstrations are all instantiated as the completed structure of the edition as such. The edition performs its own meaning. Any other meaning it might have, or be given, could only enter the field as another performative act, another edition.

There is perhaps small need to illustrate the performativity of translations. D. G. Rossetti’s comments on his great and influential book *The Early Italian Poets* (1861) are so telling, however, that he can be usefully called to speak for many. Because “a translation [involves] the necessity of settling many points without discussion,” Rossetti observes, it “remains perhaps the most direct form of commentary” that can be brought to literary work.¹¹ T. S. Eliot’s displeasure with Rossetti’s book is as programmatic as the book itself, and the Kane-Donaldson *Piers* outraged various scholars for similar reasons. The critical thoroughness and integrity of both works is exactly the problem. It does no good to say, as some have, that Rossetti “mistranslates” certain passages, any more than demurs at individual readings in the Kane-Donaldson *Piers* can gain serious critical force. Eliot’s disapproval of Rossetti is far more to the point, for he understood that Rossetti was using his translations to install a commentary on the relation between pagan and Christian spirituality. If editing is the paradigm of performative scholarship, translation is perhaps the same for criticism-as-interpretation.

Whereas in imaginative work the passage from performance to deformation is easily negotiated, the same is not true for critical work. Deformative scholarship is all but forbidden, the thought of it either

irresponsible or damaging to critical seriousness. It exists nonetheless, and in certain cases it has gained justifiable distinction and importance. Forgery is the most important type of deformative scholarship, nor should its contribution to the advancement of learning be underestimated, as Anthony Grafton has recently shown.¹² Interesting as this type of deformance must be, we shall set it aside in order to concentrate on procedures of interpretive deformation. The latter are best exemplified in heretical and other kinds of nonnormative readings of established cultural artifacts. *Sortes Virgilianae* and subjective appropriations of poetical works are types of interpretive deformation. So are travesty re-textualizations, both deliberate and unpremeditated: the first type is exemplified in the work of Kathy Acker, the second in mistaken and deviant readings produced, for example, by students unaware of an ignorance in their historical or linguistic understanding.¹³

All these cases of interpretive deformation fall outside Dickinson's radical proposal of Backward Reading. In literary work, for example, invasions or distortions of the documentary foundation of the artifact are rare. That interpreters avoid such moves demonstrates, we think, something more than a ground of critical orthodoxy that readers are disinclined to attack. The reluctance shows, more interestingly, that interpreters—even radical ones—do not commonly locate hermeneutic vitality in the documentary features of literary works. Because meaning is assumed to develop as a linguistic event, critical deformance plays itself out in the field of the signifieds. The great contemporary exception proving this rule is the remarkable work of Randall McLeod, whose "transmissive" explorations of (mostly Renaissance) works comprise, we believe, one of the most important, and clearly one of the most imaginative, bodies of critical writing of our time.¹⁴

Critical and interpretive limits are thus regularly established (and for the most part quite unselfconsciously) at the Masoretic wall of the physical artifact, whose stability and integrity is taken as inviolable. From an interpretive point of view, this assumption brackets off from attention crucial features of imaginative works, features wherein the elemental forms of meaning are built and elaborated. These forms are so basic and conventionally governed—they are alphabetical and diacritical; they are the rules for character formation, character arrangement, and textual space, as well as for the structural forms of words, phrases, and higher morphemic and phonemic units—that readers tend to treat them as preinterpretive and precritical. In truth, however, they comprise the operating system of language, the basis that drives and supports the front-end software.

That computing metaphor explains why most readers do not fool around with these levels of language. To do so entails plunging to deep

recesses of textual and artifactual forms. Linguists, semioticians, bibliographers, and cognitive theorists regularly explore these territories, but their work is not normally concerned with interpretation in the customary sense—that is, with explaining aesthetic and stylistic features of works in formal and/or thematic terms. Reading Backward is a critical move that invades these unvisited precincts of imaginative works. It is our paradigm model of any kind of deformative critical operation.

Such a model brings to attention areas of the poetic and artifactual media that usually escape our scrutiny. But this enlargement of the subject matter of criticism does not define the most significant function of deformative operations. Far more important is the stochastic process it entails. Reading Backward is a highly regulated method for disordering the senses of a text. It turns off the controls that organize the poetic system at some of its most general levels. When we run the deformative program through a particular work we cannot predict the results. As Dickinson elegantly puts it, “A Something overtakes the Mind,” and we are brought to a critical position in which we can imagine things about the text that we did not and perhaps could not otherwise know.

There is one other important result. A deformative procedure puts the reader in a highly idiosyncratic relation to the work. This consequence could scarcely be avoided, since deformation sends both reader and work through the textual looking glass. On that other side customary rules are not completely short-circuited, but they *are* held in abeyance, to be chosen among (there are many systems of rules), to be followed or not as one decides. Deformative moves reinvestigate the terms in which critical commentary will be undertaken. Not the least significant consequence, as will be seen, is the dramatic exposure of subjectivity as a live and highly informative option of interpretive commentary, if not indeed one of its essential features, however neglected in neoclassical models of criticism that search imaginative works for their “objective” and general qualities.

V. Examples and Experiments

Pictorial deformation is a mode not explicitly addressed or exemplified here, for reasons of space and medium. We refer you to the critical deformations that we carried out on a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Fogg Museum’s copy of *The Blessed Damozel*.¹⁵ This section focuses instead on poetic deformations, which we have so far organized into four types: reordered (for example, reading backward), isolating (for example, reading only verbs or other parts of speech), altering (exteriorizing variants—potential versions—of words in the work; or

altering the spatial organization, typography, or punctuation of a work), and adding (perhaps the most subjective of our deformative poetics). Our focus here will be on the first two types of deformance and on two works by Wallace Stevens, beginning with “reading backward” as our paradigm deformance. Stevens is peculiarly apt for deformance because his work has been alternately judged philosophically serious and poetically nonsensical—as is demonstrated by the divergent reactions of critics like B. J. Leggett and Hugh Kenner¹⁶—and so serves as a ground for the conflict between poetry-as-meaning and poetry-as-style. Without imagining a resolution to this conflict, we hope to go some ways toward clarifying how it operates. Approaching Stevens’s poetry through its non-semantic elements, we want to show how its pretensions to meaning are not so much a function of ideas as of style.

Our first case in point is “The Search for Sound Free from Motion” (1942), in which Stevens engages the issue of world-sound versus human-sound:

All afternoon the gramophone
 Parl-parled the West-Indian weather.
 The zebra leaves, the sea
 And it all spoke together.

The many-stanzaed sea, the leaves
 And it spoke all together.
 But you, you used the word,
 Your self its honor.

All afternoon the gramophoon,
 All afternoon the gramophoon,
 The world as word,
 Parl-parled the West-Indian hurricane.

The world lives as you live,
 Speaks as you speak, a creature that
 Repeats its vital words, yet balances
 The syllable of a syllable.

Before deforming this text, let us consider how we might analyze it in a normative conceptual way, “figuring out what it means.” The final stanza grammatically conflates “the world” and “you”—where “you” is both reader and poem—into “a creature,” which is then the reference of all three: world, reader, and poem. All three “repeat” life as language (“its vital words”) in the seemingly non-existent space indicated by “The syllable of a syllable.”

Each stanza carries on a similar layering conflation: gramophone, weather, leaves, sea, you, word, hurricane, creature, syllable. In this case, as Charles Olson might have argued, our reality is “no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things.”¹⁷ Pondering between-ness itself, we move to search out Stevens’s nonhierarchical verbal space, where organizing properties like motion or syllables—and thus divisive temporality—can be undone, where sound can be free from motion. In this interstitial realm, the syllable of a syllable is perhaps the ultimate straddler. It can be the sound the syllable makes in the spoken version of its written production—the life of its print, the sign of the imperative that the marks of printed language are only one part of a language event also spoken. The syllable of a syllable can also be the letters which are the smallest units of any syllable, the shifting territory between and alongside of phonemes and morphemes, as well as phonemes and morphemes themselves. It can also be the *idea* of the syllable, the Platonic syllable’s “signified.” Stevens’s phrase, as we grope to explain it, to paraphrase it, emerges as an imagination of something we do not know.

The poem’s culminant line summarizes a linguistic action that observes forms of discursive order which exceed conceptual formulation. But this incomprehensibility has been with the poem all along: “All afternoon the gramophone” announces the pleasing nonsense that ordinary words cultivate, seeming to long for, arbitrarily. The decision to generate a gramophone from an afternoon is finally a human one. But the decision will be riven with paradox, as the equally determinate title, so resolutely paradoxical, declares.

This lineated text, moving forward, becomes an instance of the “search” named in the title. It is (literally) a textual passage to impossibility. How then are we to understand it? A deformation of the text becomes useful at this point: what if we retrace the poem’s path, moving in a reverse quest over the way it seems to have come? In fact, “sound free from motion” accompanies sense free from direction. The languaged “world as word” can be free from the world as regular rotating object, and we can read this poem backward, as Dickinson prompts us to do:

The syllable of a syllable
Repeats its vital words, yet balances
Speaks as you speak, a creature that
The world lives as you live,

Parl-parled the West-Indian hurricane.
The world as word,
All afternoon the gramophone,
All afternoon the gramophone,

Your self its honor.
 But you, you used the word,
 And it all spoke together.
 The many-stanzaed sea, the leaves

And it all spoke together.
 The zebra leaves, the sea
 Parl-parled the West-Indian weather.
 All afternoon the gramophone

The point of such an exercise is not only to see the poem afresh. It is more important to see that the poem yields to such a remapping. The arbitrary imposition of a reversed order on the original layout indicates that the poem possesses its own means for evading temporal determinateness.

Reconsider the new "first" stanza: "The syllable of a syllable" is now the opening subject instead of the concluding object. We may fairly argue that it thus acts as a hidden subject repercutively, retrospectively, in the original order of the poem. Here its act turns explicit: the morpheme of the morpheme, the word of the word (other ways of saying "the syllable of a syllable") is involved in repetition: it speaks over and over again "its vital words." We do not know what these words are, but we do see that the poem embeds the knowledge of them in itself, makes an absolute of the existence of "vital words." The poem, then, knows what is vital, knows that the vital gets repeated in and as verbal interstices. This knowledge appears not as a developed, least of all a completed, understanding, but as an original idea. At the same time, that interstice ("the syllable of a syllable") "balances": the repetition of the vital is a unified reinscription, but nevertheless there is a duality, there is something to balance. In the discovered syntax of backwardness, that something is both the subject itself (the syllable of a syllable must balance itself) and the object (it must also balance "its vital words").

The next line can be read as a continuation: the subject "balances / Speaks," juggles multiple *paroles*. It can also be read as a new verb phrase for our subject ("The syllable of a syllable / . . . / Speaks as you speak"). In this second reading, the interstitial subject is now linked to the indefinite "you," which in the absence of more specific definition the reader may take as herself, or as an other within the confines of the poem. The backward reading retains the ambiguity of "a creature" but now restricts it only to the subject (the interstitial "syllable of a syllable") and to the "you." This restriction makes it possible to argue that the "world" has a diminished importance in the constellation of the final stanza, in the same way that we recognize the new subject position of "the syllable of a syllable" as throwing back its meaning on the text in its original lineated order. What happens to this "creature" in the next line?

It is "a creature that / The world lives as you live": it is a creature that the world enlivens (now reading "lives" as a transitive rather than as an intransitive verb) as it enlivens "you." Or the backward reading strips the pronoun "that," in the third line, of any object and throws us into the fourth line as into an absolute statement: "The world lives as you live."

This backward reading not only shows more than the poem's temporal instability. It demonstrates the repercussive effects of the alternate (backward) meanings on the original order. In the repetitions of the poem, "its vital words," lie the variations of the poem, as we glimpse in the suggestive lines "But you, you used the word, / And it all spoke together." Because this is not a message, we read it more than once. Because we read it over and over again we "hear" the variations in order and meaning.

As we see in this commentary, deformance does not banish interpretation. The reversed text is still subject to, still giving of, interpretive readings. Deformance *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.

Perhaps even more crucially, deformance reveals the special inner resources that texts have when they are constituted poetically. Nor do judgments about the putative quality of the poem matter. Good, bad, mediocre poems, by whatever measure or judgment: in so far as they are poetically made, they share this special kind of intelligibility.¹⁸ Once a textual *poesis* is undertaken, then, language is set beyond the order of conceptual and expository categories. Not outside those categories—poems deal with expository meaning because they deal in language—but beyond them.

Another example from Stevens is an experiment in isolating deformation: eliminating everything from a poem except certain words, to see what happens when they are alone on the page. One might try reading only the verbs of poems, which helps to isolate the energy or dormancy of the poem's action. One might also try reading only nouns, in order to throw into relief whether they are mostly abstract or concrete, whether the poem is or is not noun-heavy.

For this example of isolating deformance we use "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.

Again we start with some normative interpretive moves to suggest why deformance is a good way to engage the poem's stylistic orders. The poem enacts an otherness, what it calls the "nothing" of its experience, discouraging other standards (not thinking outside winter, of spring with its full trees and therefore of winter's bareness as miserable). One's senses are shifted inside the poetic space: the "listener" "beholds" rather than hearing, "one" has "a mind of winter" but does not in fact escape from the potential "misery" of realizing the difference between cold and other weather.

Once we have noted the self-sufficient "nothingness" of this poem, two related points immediately rise up: what do we say about the poem's unexportable meanings—its wintry resistance to the spring of comparison and prose translation—and how do we say it? Say that Stevens's poetic "nothing" is not (necessarily, at least) the negative force we tend to associate with that word. If this poetry makes "nothing" happen, what does "nothing" make happen? How do we talk about "nothing"? Which is another way of asking: what are the prosodic tools proper to the incommensurate?

We can try to answer these questions by deforming "The Snow Man," first making it more prose-like and then stripping it of clarifying context and syntax. First, to help analyze the extent of its syntax or sense, let us set it out typographically as prose:¹⁹

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.

This prose setting demonstrates that the original poem is more like prosaic free verse structured into visual tercets than like a descendent of

trimeter or tetrameter couplets—hence we might expect limited success with a critical analysis that relies on metrical prosodies. The poem moves from an independent clause (before the first semicolon) to a clause which depends on the subject of the first clause (between first and second semicolons) to a final long dependent clause which undoes the independence of the earlier clauses by modifying them without achieving grammatical closure. This modification is especially prominent after “a few leaves, which is the sound of the land,” and so forth. What seems independent loses its subject and then loses its independence; in terms of grammar and syntax, the poem enacts an independence-dissolving progress. In terms of “meaning,” however, the last half of the poem is more vibrant and mysterious: the first clauses are (merely) descriptive, while the final dependent clause is replete with some kind of philosophical or ontological import.

Read as prose, then, the poem disassembles itself grammatically but increases in “meaningful” assertion. The independence of the “sentences” comes undone, so if readers want to form some completion of the poem’s sense they must do so nonsyntactically, willfully, joining the first and second parts of the poem, undoing its grammar, and flouting punctuation rules. Imagining the reading process this way, we might say the reader brings independence into existence; the poetic “nothing” makes readerly independence happen.

If this is so grammatically and syntactically, is it also so semantically? We can explore this question through a double deformation of the poem, examining it in isolated pieces. Start with a noun reading, keeping the words in their same positions relative to the complete poem:

	mind	winter	
	frost	boughs	
pine-trees		snow;	
		time	
	junipers		ice,
spruces		glitter	
	sun;		
misery	sound	wind,	
sound	leaves,		
	sound	land	
	wind		
		place	

	listener,	snow,
	nothing himself,	
Nothing		nothing

What does such deformative diagraming help us to *see*? First, and tellingly for this poem, it enhances the significance of the page's white space, which now appears as a poetic equivalent for the physical "nothing" of snow. It also enhances one of the poem's salient semantic features (nouns, in this case), calling into question and perhaps exposing more of their inset importance. Stevens's poem is exposed as both noun-heavy and noun-balanced. In each stanza, a fairly equal distribution balances the moorings of nouns and the airy nothing of the (temporarily invisible) words that string nouns together and help determine their interrelations. When nouns are so crucial, do so much to "tell" a poem, might we read it as a poem of quiddity, perhaps?

Perhaps, and especially when we see that the first four stanzas have only one abstract noun apiece—"mind," "time," "misery," and "place"—and that these are outnumbered by concrete, physical nouns. But this imbalance changes in the final stanza, whose three abstract nouns, repetitions of "nothing," might be said to overmaster both abstract and concrete forerunners. Furthermore, the triad "sound wind" "sound leaves" and "sound land" matches the triad of "nothing" "Nothing" "nothing." We might say that the (concrete) nouns implant their own (abstract) cancellations, especially when we also see that the opening noun, "mind," arcs to "nothing" in the end. In spatial terms, this isolating deformance highlights the gap of the final line: the final two nouns—"Nothing nothing"—are further apart from each other than any others in the poem, and the first "Nothing" is the only capitalized noun, anchoring the physique of the poem like a cornerstone.

And yet the poem has such palpable senses: those concrete nouns never go away, planted as they are in "nothing." To help us consider the poem's senses, we can turn from deforming the poem through the intellectual geography of its nouns and instead isolate everything but verbs, those words that might be said to effect the action and feeling of the poem:

	must have	
	regard	
		crusted
	have been	
behold		shagged

not to think

is

is blowing

listens
beholds

is not

is.

Here too we have a balance: between four verbs of action and four of absolute being. "To regard," "to behold," "not to think," and "listens" begin to interweave, in the fourth stanza, with four repetitions of "is," which has (is) the last word. But this is clearly less a poem of verbs than of nouns. The final "is not is" declares the simultaneous presence and negation of verbal being; it also anchors the final state of being on the far right side of the poem's base, literally on the other side of the capitalized "Nothing." The strong but unspecific "not to think" is followed by a long verb-free space, and then "is" "is blowing" around. "Not to think" contains the action it cancels just as the final verbs here declare the presence ("is") that the final nouns ("Nothing nothing") negate.

Why are the verbs here so attenuated—or, in the case of "is," simultaneously weak and strong absolutes? As the noun arc is from "mind" to "nothing," the verb arc is from "have" to "is," from (imperative, self) possession to (indeterminate, absolute) being. In informative terms, we might see this as the linguistic relinquishment of the poem to the reader, a giving up similar to the way the "prose" version of the poem leaves sense-making to the reader's independent mechanisms. If both nouns and verbs become increasingly inhabitable ("is" and "nothing" open space as "have regard crusted" and "mind winter frost boughs" do not), then their poem does as well. Which may be why Stevens's poem is so popular: its syntax, nouns, and verbs slowly arc into inhabitability.

Finally, let us reshuffle our diagram to the following mixture of *selected* noun and verbs, isolating the poem's linguistic moves towards inhabitable emptiness:

	mind	winter
regard		boughs
		snow;
		time
behold		ice,
		glitter

not to think
 misery sound wind,
 sound leaves,

 sound land
 wind
 is blowing place

 listener listens
 nothing beholds
 Nothing is not nothing is.

Here, clearly demarcated, is this poetical nothing's paradoxical *somethingness*. One wants to turn it slowly around before one's eyes, the way one turns around a decorated vase or sculpture to see it from different perspectives. Take this concatenated text of nouns and verbs and reconstruct it in reverse. You will see it revealed again, in a further range of its visible intelligibility.

In this deformance we also enact a critical subjectivity: this version isolates only *some* of the poem's nouns and verbs. Such selectiveness instances the critic's position as reactive reader, choosing certain re-combinations which exteriorize the variable attention we pay to parts of the poem. And what we see in this deformance is that Stevens's poem harbors the redeemed form of that "Positive Negation" Coleridge sought in fear and trembling and could not find, perhaps because he sought it in the "Limbo" of conceptual forms rather than on the simple page of Stevens's intelligible space and images. Not that Coleridge's poem—which is a kind of obverse of Stevens's—is therefore to be imagined a lesser *poiesis* than "The Snow Man." In certain ways Coleridge's poem is more impressive, the way Byron's dark poetry is always so impressive. They are poets, to use Stevens's own thought, who "go in fear of abstractions," and entering the realm of that fear is their honorable feat.

As a final suggestion, we could take Coleridge's "Limbo" and read it backwards. Couplet verse is especially apt for such treatment: turn it over to different kinds of transformation; eliminate everything but the capitalized nouns; isolate the adjectives, those stylistic signatures of a romantic style. Open the poem to its variable self.²⁰

VI. Conclusion: Deformance and Critical Dialectics

These examples of interpretive deformance have been chosen partly as incentives to critical speculation and partly for their programmatic

clarity. Although they do not represent the mainstream of twentieth-century interpretive procedure, a confederacy of such work can be found, especially among artists and poets, for whom interpretation regularly involves some kind of performative element. Blake, Rossetti, and Dante, as we have seen, have been notable exponents of these interpretive ways. Scholarly uses of such methods are, however, rare. The work of Randall McLeod is the contemporary exception proving the rule: that interpretive deformance is an unlicensed critical activity, all very well for poets and artists, but inapt for the normative rigor of the scholar and critic.²¹

In our view, however, we may usefully regard all criticism and interpretation as deformance. Scholars murder to dissect, as Wordsworth famously observed, and as naive readers—typically, young students—often tell us when they recoil from our interpretive operations. “You’ve ruined the poem for me”: that kind of comment, academically infamous, illustrates something far more important than a protest against scholarly sophisticates. Often coming as a kind of blanket judgment on reflexive interpretation, it implicitly asserts the deformative status of critical method in general.²²

The truth-content of such views is further exposed when we reflect on the critical dialectics of the great Italian philologist Galvano della Volpe. At the heart of his *Critique of Taste* (1960) stands a view of interpretation—he calls it a “realist” view—that supplants, on the one hand, the dominant idealist approaches broadcast through Modernist and New Critical venues (both romantic and neoclassical), and, on the other, the various historicisms (Marxist and otherwise) that have gained increasing authority during the past thirty years. Like Dante, and in contrast to, say, Coleridge or Schlegel, della Volpe sees poetry as a type of “discourse” whose rationality—*ragionamento*—consists in its exploitation of the “polysemous” dimensions of language, whose structures are no more (and no less) difficult or even “mysterious” than processes of logical deduction and induction. For della Volpe, “Intelligibility” is as much a feature of *poiesis* as of *scientia*.

Interpretation is the application of *scientia* to *poiesis*, or the effort to elucidate one discourse form in terms of another. Furthermore, the effort is not directed toward establishing general rules or laws, but to explaining a unitary, indeed a unique, phenomenon. A doubled gap thus emerges through the interpretive process itself, and it is the necessary presence of this gap that shapes della Volpe’s critical thought. We may usefully recall here that when poets and artists use imaginative forms to interpret other such forms, they pay homage to this gap by throwing it into relief. Rossetti’s famous sonnets for pictures, like all such works from Cavalcanti to John Ashbery, do not so much translate the originary works as construct imaginative paraphrases. Rossetti’s

theory of translation, as we see in *The Early Italian Poets*, follows a similar paraphrastic procedure.

Della Volpe's theory of interpretation runs along the same intellectual salient. When he argued that "critical paraphrase" should ground interpretive method, he was consciously installing a non-Hegelian form of dialectical criticism. In place of "a *circular* movement of negation and conservation of an original meta-historical unity of opposites," della Volpe offers "a dialectic of expressive facts"—the facts of the discrete poem and its discrete paraphrase—in which "neither of the elements of the relation can be reduced absolutely to the other . . . for . . . they . . . circulate only *relatively* within each other, in the *diversified unity of an historical movement*."²³ Interpretation for della Volpe, whatever its pretensions, always displays a gap between the work being examined and the student. But this gap does not represent a failure of criticism, or even a mysticism of *poiesis*. It locates the source and end and test of the art being examined. Della Volpe calls the gap a "quid," which comes into play as soon as the critic develops some "philosophical or sociological or historical equivalent of the poetic text," that is to say the "paraphrase . . . of the poetic thought or . . . content." Because this paraphrase will necessarily constitute "a reduction" of the original, "a comparison will necessarily be instituted between this paraphrase and the poetic thought or 'content' which it paraphrases" (193).

Critical interpretation develops out of an initial moment of the originary work's "degradation" via "uncritical paraphrase": "for in the case of the poetic, polysemic text, paraphrase—the *regression* to current linguistic use . . . constitutes the premise of an internal *progression* of thought . . . , an internal variation and development of meanings, which is disclosed . . . in a . . . philological comparison . . . of the paraphrase with that which is paraphrased" (133). Interpretation, then, is a constellation of paraphrases that evolve dialectically from an uncritical to a critical moment, from "regression" to "progression." The interpretive constellation develops as the "uncritical" features of each critical turn get exposed—as new turns are taken, as the paraphrase is successively rephrased. One moves so to speak from "degradation" to "degradation," or as we would say from deformance to deformance. Thus paraphrastics becomes "the *beginning* and *end* of a whole process" of comparative explorations that get executed across the "quid" or gap that a process of interpretation brings into being. Again, the process is open-ended not because the "poem itself" possesses some mysterious, inexhaustible "meaning" but because its originary semiotic determinations must repeatedly be discovered within the historical space defined by the della Volpian "quid," where distantiation licenses "the method . . . of experimental analysis" (199).

Della Volpe carefully separates his theory of interpretation from the

dialectics we associate with Hegel and especially Heidegger. The latter involves a process of thought-refinement: through conversation or internal dialogue, we clarify our ideas to ourselves. We come to realize what we did not know we knew. This kind of reflection traces itself back to the idea of Platonic anamnesis. Della Volpe, by contrast, follows an Aristotelian line of thought, a "method . . . of experimental analysis." This method develops a process of non-Hegelian historical reflection. Interpretive moments stand in nonuniform relations with each other so that the interpretation unfolds in fractal patterns of continuities and discontinuities. Besides realizing, perhaps, what we did not know we knew, we are also led into imaginations of what we had not known at all.

The deformative examples set forth in the previous section are conceived as types of a della Volpean "experimental analysis." Being a philologist, della Volpe pursues this kind of analysis through a series of searching historicist paraphrases of the texts he chooses to consider. To attempt a socio-historical paraphrase is to experiment with the poetical work, to subject it to a hypothesis of its meanings. As in any scientific experiment with natural phenomena, the engagement with the originary phenomenon inevitably exposes the limits of the hypothesis, and ultimately returns us to an even more acute sense of the phenomena we desire to understand. So it is with della Volpe's paraphrases. By contrast, our "experimental analyses" place primary emphasis on the preconceptual elements of text. We do this because social and historical formations seem to us far less determinate, far more open to arbitrary and imaginative construction, than they appear in della Volpe's Marxist frame of reference.

If we follow della Volpe's method, then, we feel ourselves closer in spirit to the thought of, say, Blake when he remarks on the difference between the intelligence of art and the intelligence of philosophy: "Cunning & Morality are not Poetry but Philosophy the Poet is Independent & Wicked the Philosopher is Dependent & Good" (*CP* 634). Our deformations do not flee from the question, or the generation, of "meaning." Rather, they try to demonstrate—the way one demonstrates how to make something, or do something—what Blake here assertively proposes: that "meaning" in imaginative work is a secondary phenomenon, a kind of meta-data, what Blake called a form of worship "Dependent" upon some primary poetical tale. This point of view explains why, in our deformative maneuvers, interpretive lines of thought spin out of some initial nondiscursive "experiment" with the primary materials. "Meaning" is important not as explanation but as residue. It is what is left behind after the experiment has been run. We develop it not to explain the poem but to judge the effectiveness of the experiment we undertook.

One could do worse than to recall, even in this special aesthetic frame of reference, Marx's last thesis on Feuerbach. Only philosophers try to understand art. The point is to change it. Our actions on these works, as on anything else in our experience, allow us to begin to understand our thinking about them. To essay a more direct application of "interpretation" to poetical work runs the risk of suggesting that interpretation can be adequate to *poiesis*. It cannot; it can only run a thematic experiment with the work, enlightening it by inadequacy and indirection. In a hermeneutic age like our own, illusions about the sufficiency of interpretative meaning before the work of art are especially strong. At such a historical moment one might rather look for interpretations that flaunt their subjectivity and arbitrariness, interpretations that increase their value by offering themselves at a clear discount.

To deliberately accept the inevitable failure of interpretive "adequacy" is to work toward discovering new interpretive virtues, somewhat as Lyn Hejinian claims that the supposed "inadequacy" of language "is merely a disguise for other virtues."²⁴ Interpretations that parody or ironize themselves become especially apt and useful, as we see in Derrida's textual games, or in the brilliant philological studies of Randall McLeod, or in Barthes's *S/Z*, or in Laura Riding's attitude toward language and understanding: "our minds are still moving, and *backward* as well as *forward*; the nearest we get to truth at any given moment is, perhaps, only an idea—a dash of truth somewhat flavouring the indeterminate substance of our minds."²⁵ This attitude toward literate comprehension, and the kind of criticism it inspires, gains its power by baring its own devices. We take it seriously because it makes sure that we do not take it too seriously. Examples of such critical approaches are legion: we just need to remember to look for them, and perhaps how to look for them.

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Appendix

[We give here, without comment, a series of deformative moves on Stevens's "The Snow Man," as well as a deformance of Coleridge's "Limbo." These illustrate a few other operations that might be undertaken with poems.]

1. Reading backward

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

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

In the sound of a few leaves,
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 Of the January sun; and not to think

The spruces rough in the distant glitter
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 And have been cold a long time

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

2. Reordered deformance

One must have a mind of winter	To regard the frost and the boughs
And have been cold a long time	Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
	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.	

3. Isolating deformance, all nouns and verbs

must have mind winter
regard frost boughs
pine-trees crusted snow;

have been time
behold junipers shagged ice,
spruces glitter

sun; not to think
misery sound wind,
sound leaves,

is sound land
wind
is blowing place

listener, listens snow,
nothing beholds
Nothing is not nothing is.

4. Isolating deformance, all words other than nouns and verbs
(plus punctuation)

One a of
To the and the
Of the with ;
And a long
To the with ,
The rough in the distant
Of the January ; and
Of any in the of the ,
In the of a few ,

Which the of the
Full of the same
That in the same bare

For the , who in the ,
And, ,
that there and the that .

5. *Altering deformance*

one m ust halve a mine dove w inter
to re guard the f rost and the bows
of the pine trees c rusted with s no

and halve been c old along time
to be hold the junipers sh agged with ice,
the spruces ruff in the dis t ant g litter

of the January son and not to th ink
of any miser y in the s ound of the win d
in the s ound of a few l eave s

witches the s ound of the l and
full of the s ame win d
that is b low ing in the s ame b are p lace

for the listen er who list ens in the s no
an d no thing him self be hold s
no thing that is no t t here an d the no thing that is

6. *Altering and reordered: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Limbo"*

The sole
true Something—
This, in Limbo's Den
It frightens
Ghosts, as here
Ghosts frighten men.
Thence cross'd
unseiz'd—and shall
some fated hour
Be pulveris'd
by Demogorgon's power,
And given as poison
to annihilate souls—
Even now it shrinks them—
they shrink in
as Moles (Nature's mute
monks, live mandrakes
of the ground) creep back
from Light—then listen
for its sound;
See but to dread,
and dread they know not

by flit of Shades,—unmeaning
they as moonlight
on the dial
of the day! But that
is lovely—looks
like Human Time, —
an Old Man
with a steady look
sublime, that stops his earthly
task to watch
the skies; but he is blind—
a Statue hath
such eyes;—yet having moonward
turn'd his face
by chance, gazes the orb
with moon-like

why—the natural alien
of their negative eye.

'Tis a strange place,
this Limbo!—not
a Place, yet name it
so;—where Time
and weary Space fettered
from flight, with night-mare
sense of fleeing
Strive for their last
crepuscular half-being;—
Lank Space,
and scytheless
Time with branny
hands barren and soundless
as the measuring sands,
Not mark'd

countenance, with scant white
hairs, with foretop
bald and high, he gazes still, —
his eyeless face
all eye;—as 'twere an organ
full of silent sight
his whole face seemeth to rejoice
in light! Lip touching lip, all
moveless, bust and limb —
he seems to gaze
at that which seems to gaze
on him! No such sweet
doth Limbo den immure, wall'd
round and made a spirit-
jail secure, by the mere
horror of blank
Naught-at-all, whose circumambience
doth these ghosts enthrall.
A lurid thought
is growthless, dull Privation, yet that
is but a Purgatory
curse; Hell knows a fear far
worse, a fear—a future
state;—'tis positive
Negation!

NOTES

1 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters To A Young Poet*, tr. M. D. Herter Norton, rev. ed. (New York, 1954).

2 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955; rpt. New York, 1989), p. 265.

3 *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), vol. 3, p. 916.

4 For a more complete investigation of a "praxis of theory" see Jerome McGann, "Imagining What You Don't Know: The Theoretical Goals of the Rossetti Archive" (online text available at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/~jjm2f/chum.html>).

5 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. David V. Erdman with commentary by Harold Bloom, new and rev. ed. (Berkeley, 1982), plates 21–22; hereafter cited in text as *CP*. See also his "Annotations to Boyd's Historical Notes on Dante," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose*. Also see below, p. 48.

6 Had the interpretive method displayed by St. John of the Cross, in his commentaries on his own poems, become as influential for us as Dante's methods have been, we might think very differently about interpretive analysis. St. John's commentaries are flagrantly subjective. Invoking the entirety of a Judeo-Christian discourse, they nonetheless keep us aware that the interpretations stand in a partial and idiosyncratic relation to the poems. The absolute status of the poems is both assumed and reinforced by the commentaries—as if the poems had been, as Blake would later say, "dictated from Eternity."

7 "Nothing is in the intellect that is not first in the sensorium."

8 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Defense of Poetry," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977), pp. 502–3.

9 William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1975), p. 212.

10 Lee Patterson, "The Logic of Textual Criticism and the Way of Genius: The Kane-Donaldson Piers Plowman in Historical Perspective," in *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Chicago, 1985), p. 69.

11 *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London, 1911), p. 283.

12 Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton, 1990).

13 Kathy Acker's fictional recastings of canonical texts are well known. More naive literary travesties circulate in the academy as comical anecdotes but are not normally treated with the seriousness we think they deserve. See the student discussion of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" recapitulated in Jerome McGann, "The Alice Fallacy; or, Only God Can Make a Tree. A Dialogue of Pleasure and Instruction," in *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in an Age of Cultural Studies*, ed. James Soderholm (Tuscaloosa, 1997), pp. 46–73.

14 See, for example, McLeod's recent essay "Information on Information," in *TEXT* 5, ed. D. C. Greetham and W. Speed Hill (New York, 1991), pp. 241–84.

15 These deformances, with accompanying commentary, can be found in the final section of the online essay "Imagining What You Don't Know: The Theoretical Goals of the Rossetti Archive."

16 In *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York, 1975), Kenner calls Stevens "a mere poet," criticizing what he sees as Stevens's preference for "saying" (subject matter) over "making" (form), and at the same time complaining about the way Stevens's verbal world is wholly removed from the "real" world (see especially pp. 50–57, 67–75). B. J. Leggett, on the other hand, finds Stevens's world a place to take seriously, a place for philosophical and systematic theorizing: see *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham, 1992) and *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction* (Chapel Hill, 1987).

17 Charles Olson, "The Escaped Cock: Notes on Lawrence & the Real," in *Human Universe and Other Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (New York, 1967), p. 123.

18 This (so to speak) preemptive status of poetical and imaginative work licenses freedom of engagement and interpretation. Everyone who reads poetry or responds to art will and should have the authority of personal "taste." Expert and educated responses are a special genre, nothing more (and nothing less). Choosing to frame expression under the sign of the imagination is a defining gesture that does not in itself raise the question of "goodness" or "badness." It simply sets the audience in a special relation to the medium and the gestures being made. This situation is what makes it possible—perhaps even imperative—to generate elaborate interpretations of imaginative works that might be widely judged to be "minor" or "inferior." Such interpretations are efforts to give an "objective" status to a serious subjective engagement. For examples see the readings of Kilmer's "Trees" and of Hemans's "The Homes of England" in Jerome McGann, "The Alice Fallacy," and "Literary History, Romanticism, and Felicia Hemans," in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia, 1994), pp. 210–27.

19 This kind of toggling back and forth between poetizing prose and prosing poetry has been carried out before in critical texts. Two examples: in *Metre, Rhyme, and Free Verse* (London, 1970), pp. 17–18, George Fraser lineates a prose passage as free verse; and in *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetics* (New York, 1978), Veronica Forrest-Thomson lineates a newspaper paragraph as free verse and as a kind of bipart structure visually similar to alliterative verse.

20 See our Appendix for some further examples of deformative operations, including a reordered reading of Coleridge's "Limbo."

21 McLeod is the most textually deforming "mainstream" critic we know. But a substantial and growing tradition of twentieth-century "experimental" criticism enacts various kinds of performance, deformance, and subjectivity. This criticism is carried out almost exclusively by those who are primarily known as creative writers: a partial list includes Gertrude Stein (*How to Write*), some of Ezra Pound (*Guide to Kulchur*, for example), Louis Zukofsky (*Bottom: On Shakespeare*), John Cage (see *Silence; Lectures and Writings by John Cage*), Susan Howe (*My Emily Dickinson*), and Bob Perelman, ed., *Writing/Talks*. See also the double issue of *Chain* (vol. 3, Parts 1 and 2, 1996) edited by Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr and *A Poetics of Criticism* (eds. Spahr, Wallace, Prevaillet, and Rehm).

A fuller treatment of deformative criticism will involve some examination of these twentieth-century critical engagements. For our present purposes, it has seemed more pressing to situate deformance in the context of earlier interpretive histories.

22 Deformative criticism can be a very successful pedagogical counter to the problems of interpretive criticism. Deformance helps students to interact with the physiqués of the poem: for example, with the problematics of parts of speech, which often come to be revealed as metaphorical when the poem is dislodged from its original orderings. Such interaction can also help students to overcome their common fixation on authorial intention and to see their roles as *makers* of poetic meaning in the act of reading.

23 Galvano della Volpe, *Critique of Taste*, tr. Michael Caesar (London, 1978), p. 200; hereafter cited in text.

24 Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," in *Writing/Talks*, ed. Bob Perelman (Carbondale, Ill., 1985), pp. 270–91. Hejinian is in turn echoing the sense of language's fractured sufficiency that we see in Wittgenstein.

25 Laura Riding, "Preface," in *Progress of Stories* (Deya Majorca, 1935), p. 10.

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