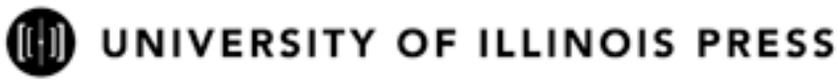

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3 POTENTIAL READINGS

"Algorithmic criticism"—the term I use to designate a reconceived computer-assisted literary criticism—shares with Oulipo a desire to use the narrowing forces of constraint to enable the liberating visions of potentiality. Its medium is the computer, but it looks neither to the bare calculating facilities of the mechanism nor to the promise of machine intelligence for its inspiration. Instead, algorithmic criticism attempts to employ the rigid, inexorable, uncompromising logic of algorithmic transformation as the constraint under which critical vision may flourish. The hermeneutic proposed by algorithmic criticism does not oppose the practice of conventional critical reading, but instead attempts to reenvision its logics in extreme and self-conscious forms. As such, it is of a piece with recent work on the notion of "textual intervention" as set forth by Rob Pope; of "deformance" as proposed by Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels; and with the computationally enacted "tamperings" undertaken by Estelle Irizarry. All three set forth a bold heuresis—one that proposes not a radical exegesis, but a radical *eisegesis* (perhaps a *katagesis)* in which the graphic and semantic codes of textuality are deliberately and literally altered.

Pope's 1994 *Textual Intervention* is to criticism what *The Oulipo Compendium* is to poetry—not primarily a theoretical exposition, but a textbook full of problems, exercises, and worked examples. Were we to insert references to computation, its opening preface might serve not only as a description of algorithmic criticism but also as a general motto for much of what we already call digital humanities:

> The best way to understand how a text works, I argue, is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try

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> to account for the exact effect of what you have done. In practice—not just in theory—we have the option of making changes at all levels, from the merest nuance of punctuation or intonation to total recasting in terms of genre, time, place, participants and medium. . . . The emphasis throughout is on exploring possible permutations and realizations of texts in and out of their original contexts. (Pope 1)

To ask "how a text works" is to invite a whole range of critical procedures, including those we normally associate with the classroom. Pope begins one exercise involving "My Last Duchess" in a way that will seem mostly familiar to anyone who has taught an introductory literature course:

> As you read, ask yourself:
>
> 1. how far you personally are prepared to adopt the Duke's position (e.g. his "voice" and self image);
> 2. what other position(s) you feel yourself drawn to adopt (even though they may have no "voices" or self-images directly available). (15)

Normally we think of such questions as ways to get the discussion moving—as a prelude to deeper matters involving agency, reliability, what is said, and what is not said. Pope, though, has a totally different project in mind (or, rather, and I will return to this in a moment, the same project reimagined with a new *techne*). As the exercise proceeds, students are "translating" the poem into their own conversational idiom, making *lists* of who is present and who is excluded (including the people who built the wall and the terrace, made the Duchess's mantle, and tend the orchard), and finally, rewriting the poem from a new center.

Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels refer to such procedures as instances of "deformance"—a word that usefully combines a number of terms, including "form," "deform," and "performance." The centerpiece of their essay is a quote from Emily Dickinson: "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—" (qtd. in McGann 106). The injunction attempts a disordering of our critical apprehensions that suggests an alignment with the disorderings of Jarry. Reading a poem backward is like viewing the face of a watch sideways—a way of unleashing the potentialities that altered perspectives may reveal:

> Reading backward is a critical move that invades these unvisited precincts of imaginative works. It is our paradigm 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

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> criticism doesn't 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 put 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 didn't and perhaps couldn't otherwise know. (McGann 116)

There are several reasons why these ideas, so culturally detached from the mathematical rigidity of computation, should resonate with creators of computational tools for literary study. Anyone who has marked up a text in a metalanguage for machine manipulation, tokenized strings for word-frequency analysis, or undertaken any of the dozens of allegedly pre-interpretative activities that go into designing computer systems for humanistic study has already come face-to-face with "the poetic and artifactual media that usually escape our scrutiny." Encoding texts in XML (extensible markup language) places one in a simultaneously cooperative and antagonistic relationship with the codes that already subsist in written works. Optical character-recognition software reveals the fragility of the grapheme. Tokenization forces us to confront the fact that the notion of a word is neither unambiguous nor satisfactorily definable for all circumstances. Rather than hindering the process of critical engagement, this relentless exactitude produces a critical self-consciousness that is difficult to achieve otherwise. In pouring the "well of English undefiled" through the thin opening of Von Neumann's bottleneck, we discover strange tensions, exceptions, and potentials.

Even the simplest of transformations yields insights about the nature of poetic form. Consider, for example, Emily Dickinson's invitation to "tell it slant":

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
>
> As lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind—
>
> (506–7)

This poem puts forth a poetics, but it might also be understood as a poetical description of our own methodologies as critics. The critic implicitly considers the "Truth's superb surprise" in literature—however contingent, however

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distanced from notions of objectivity—as being at a slant, always behind or beneath the denotative meanings of the words involved. Untangling the Circuit, restoring it to a logical and linear pattern of meaning and deduction, constitutes one of the chief activities of criticism as such. In this sense, poetry has always demanded something like "close reading." Instead of letting words continue on (as in oral recitation), the reader pauses to consider the patterns that emerge from various combinations of textual information. Often, those patterns occur at those moments where the language seems at odds—at a slant—from normal usage: *infirm* delight, success *in circuit,* the odd semantics of "As lightning to the Children eased," the capitalizations of "Truth," "Children," "Circuit," and "Delight" (though not "explanation," "lightning," "surprise" or "blind"). The backward poem deepens this engagement by revealing other forces and tensions that the forward arrangement conceals:

> Or every man be blind—
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> With explanation kind
> As lightning to the Children eased
>
> The Truth's superb surprise
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> Success in Circuit lies
> Tell all the truth but tell it slant—[1]

We who have grown accustomed to intelligibility borne of close analysis may expect nonsense to emerge from this operation, but the effect (as Dickinson intuited) is quite different. Some phrases do seem strangely contorted. The first line, in fact, seems the strangest of all—as if we were coming to the poem in medias res. We are almost invited to read it as if it ended not with Dickinson's ubiquitous em-dash, but with a colon: "Here are the things we must do to avoid blindness: . . ." The next movement of the poem, though, is a complete sentence: "The Truth must dazzle gradually / With explanation kind / As lightning to the children eased." That it should so closely resemble how one might paraphrase the thought of the original serves to illuminate the very "slanting" that Dickinson imposed upon the ordinary language from which the poem draws both its strangeness and its intelligibility. The rhymes remain in both stanzas, but the inversion of ABCB to the somewhat heterodox ABAC almost renders them invisible. The poem is as iambic backward as it is forward, but without the end-rhymes, the poem slips quietly into the cadence of prose. The appositional structure of the second stanza (or, rather, the first stanza) presents itself more strongly than before. The last line, as so often happens with this particular reading strategy, seems slightly bathetic.

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What had been a bold announcement of the poem's intent in the original, now seems almost like a limp punch line or a bon mot.

Irizarry's work, in what the Oulipians might gleefully call an instance of "anticipatory plagiary," enacts the principles of deformance in explicitly machinic terms. The move is inspired not by Oulipo, but by a constellation of Hispanic poets ranging from Pas and Borges to Juan-Eduardo Circlot and Clara Janés, all of whom "have examined substitution and permutation in theory and practice:"

> Computer-enabled "play" can accomplish the same type of alteration which these writers have pursued in their works. Such poetic play, beyond the poetic products themselves, serves as a tool to increase readers' awareness of poetry by a unique blend of word, structure, and pattern. By imbuing the poetic text with a new dimension, on-screen manipulation of what has been called "electric poetry" (Silverstein) evokes the reader's participation in the poetic process. The interactive modality offered by the electronic medium destabilizes the text, allowing the reader to explore it more thoroughly than is possible in the fixed printed medium and to both appreciate and experience poetry as "play." (Irizarry 155)

Irizarry thus envisions a group of what we might call "deformance machines": small programs designed to effect algorithmic transformations of poetic works.

Irizarry suggests the transformation of a lyric poem into an "entropic poem" in which all word-level redundancy has been removed. Poems that rely on repetition, however subtly, are particularly suited to this method. Here is Dylan Thomas's "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower":

> The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.
> And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
> My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.
>
> The force that drives the water through the rocks
> Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
> Turns mine to wax.
> And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
> How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.
>
> The hand that whirls the water in the pool
> Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
> Hauls my shroud sail.
> And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
> How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

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The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.
(Thomas 90)

Here is the entropic version—a word-frequency list that retains the order of the words.[2]

25 the	5 dumb	1 mine	1 hauls	1 shall
2 force	7 to	1 wax	1 shroud	1 calm
6 that	4 tell	2 mouth	1 sail	1 her
2 through	2 crooked	1 unto	1 hanging	1 sores
2 green	1 rose	1 veins	1 man	2 a
1 fuse	1 youth	4 how	1 clay	1 weather's
4 drives	1 bent	2 at	1 made	1 has
1 flower	1 by	1 mountain	1 hangman's	1 ticked
8 my	3 same	1 spring	1 lime	1 heaven
1 age	1 wintry	1 sucks	1 lips	1 round
1 blasts	1 fever	1 hand	2 time	1 stars
1 roots	2 water	1 whirls	1 leech	1 lover's
3 of	1 rocks	1 in	1 fountain	1 tomb
1 trees	1 red	1 pool	1 head	1 sheet
3 is	2 blood	1 stirs	1 love	1 goes
1 destroyer	1 dries	1 quicksand	1 drips	1 worm
6 and	1 mouthing	1 ropes	1 gathers	
5 I	1 streams	1 blowing	1 but	
5 am	1 turns	2 wind	1 fallen	

The entropic poem shares a family resemblance with the output of word-frequency analysis tools, which are among the fundamental computational primitives of text analysis. Like the lists generated by such tools, the new formation enters the space of the poem as a statistical paratext. But by retaining the order of the words, the entropic poem declares itself more forcefully to be what even the most apparently disinterested word-frequency list already is: a deformation of the original. It is a readable work that maintains its coherence fully until the thinning logic of compression overtakes it.

Irizarry's use of the word "entropy" recalls the use of that term in information theory, where it signifies the degree of order in a system. In information theoretical terms, the program that generated the new formation strives to bring the poem from a state of low- to high-order entropy by reducing

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the number of symbols necessary to encode the information. At times, that process is quite successful, as when the algorithm produces the cryptic "water rocks red blood" for "The force that drives the water through the rocks / Drives my red blood." The algorithm suggestively fails to compress at the ends of stanzas where a certain sense reemerges: "youth bent by same wintry fever," "made hangman's lime," "fallen shall calm her sores," "ticked heaven round stars," and "lover's tomb sheet goes worm." The entropic poem does not so much provide data about the original poem as focus our attention on certain energies in the original—in this case, similar movements in thought redescribed in new terms at the ends of stanzas.

One is perhaps tempted to consider such possible tools of algorithmic criticism as mere amusements—the critical readings they engender, as hermeneutical curiosities wholly unrelated to the practices of conventional critical reading. McGann and Samuels, however, propose that "we may usefully regard all criticism and interpretation as deformance," since all interpretation represents "the application of scientia to poiesis, or the effort to elucidate one discourse form in terms of another" (127).[3] In this view, deformance becomes not just "the best way" (as in Pope), or the new way (as in Irizarry), but an extreme form of the only way—the way it has always been done.

To speak of algorithmic criticism is to take a further step and imagine this generalization as an explicit technological program for critical reading. Texts that have become proverbial among students of new media, like the Talmud and the *I Ching*, are particularly useful here. Because they are often held up as foreshadowings of the ergodic, the interactive, and the hypertextual—that is, as unusual and distinct forms of reading and writing—there has been a tendency to deemphasize their continuity with the more normative practices of reading and writing. They provide useful test cases for the idea that all criticism and interpretation is deformance.

One consults the *I Ching* in order to determine the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of a course of action and to gain some sense of how that course is likely to unfold. With the question in mind, the reader/diviner throws three coins or yarrow stalks and arrives at a combination that will resolve to one of four numbers (six, seven, eight, or nine). Each of these numbers corresponds to one of two states for a particular line of a hexagram. If one throws a six or an eight, the line is a broken line; a seven or a nine results in a whole line. In order to determine the path and outcome of my writing on computation and literary criticism, I threw three coins six times to determine all of the lines and then stacked them on top of one another to create the following hexagram:

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In this case, the figure corresponds to the twenty-first hexagram, which bears the tag *shike* ("biting"). In Richard Rutt's translation, I am led to a page with the following text:

Sacrifice.
Favourable in disputes.

Base (9): Shackled with leg-fetters:
mutilating the feet.
NO MISFORTUNE.

(6) 2: Biting flesh:
mutilating the nose.
NO MISFORTUNE.

(6) 3: Biting dried meat:
getting poison to eat.
Little distress.
NO MISFORTUNE.

(9) 4: Biting ham in the rind:
a bronze arrow to find.
Favourable in hardship augury.
AUGURY AUSPICIOUS.

(6) 5: Biting pemmican:
finding golden bronze.
Augury DANGEROUS.
NO MISFORTUNE.

Top (9): Shouldering a cangue:
mutilating the ears.
DISASTER.

(Rutt 244)

The specific values for each line subdivide further into stable and changeable whole and broken lines. The "stack" of solid and broken lines contain certain lines that are understood to have complements in the opposite formation (certain broken lines that correspond to whole lines, and vice versa). If the

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top (unbroken) line in the previous hexagram were "unstable" (a value determined by the numeric value of the coins) and all the rest were stable, we would need to find another hexagram that corresponds exactly to the previous one, but with the top line broken. The visual metaphor is roughly that of two broken lines moving toward one another to form a whole, or conversely, a whole line stretching to the point of breaking into two. We would then understand the above oracle as referring to an additional text corresponding to hexagram 17 *(sui/pursuit)*:

Supreme offering.
Favourable in disputes.

NO MISFORTUNE.

Base (9): A building collapses.

Augury AUSPICIOUS.
Being crossed on leaving home: there will be success.

Base (9):
(6) 2: Binding little ones, losing grown men.
(6) 3: Binding grown men, losing little ones.
Pursuit ends in catching the quarry.
Augury for a dwelling: favourable.
(9) 4: Pursuit ends in finding.
Augury: DISASTROUS.
Sacrificing captives on the way;
in a covenant, could there be misfortune?
(9) 5: Captives at a triumph.
AUSPICIOUS.
Top (6): Brought in bonds, let them be guarded.
The king offers them at the West Mountain.

(Rutt 240)

Espen Aarseth considers the *I Ching* a prime example of an ergodic cybertext—a genre that includes both Web-based hypertext and computer adventure

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games. Two features make it so. First, "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). The mantic nature of the work demands "a highly specialized ritual of perusal" quite different from the act of turning the pages of a novel (2). Second, the *I Ching* constantly reminds the reader of "inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard" (3).

The first requirement is clearly met in this case. One does not ordinarily read narrative works by casting lots and turning to pages by chance, but in this case the stochastic element is clearly part of the nature of the work. The second requirement is likewise fulfilled: chance dictates only one of 4,096 (64^2) possible "perusals" of the text at a given moment. We are left to wonder what a head might have revealed where a tail was cast. In both cases, however, we may suspect merely a more pronounced version of properties that obtain in any text. Aarseth anticipates these objections at the beginning of his book on ergodic literature:

> Whenever I have had the opportunity to present the perspective of ergodic literature and cybertext to a fresh audience of literary critics and theorists, I have almost invariably been challenged on the same issues: that these texts (hypertexts, adventure games, etc.) aren't essentially different from other literary texts, because (1) all literature is to some extent indeterminate, nonlinear, and different for every reading, (2) the reader has to make choices in order to make sense of the text, and finally (3) a text cannot really be nonlinear because the reader can read it only one sequence at a time, anyway. (2)

These objections suffer, as Aarseth rightly claims, from a lack of distinction and specification. That all texts might be nonlinear effaces the obvious distinctions between a text that involves yarrow stalks and one that does not; that no text can be nonlinear reduces cognition to temporality. Aarseth's response to these objections, however, underestimates the haptic nature of the critical act:

> A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency brake and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure or influence: "Let's see what happens when I do this." The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent. (4)

The minute someone proposes to explain the meaning of a narrative—to speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, or shout abuse at it, whether in the privacy of one's thoughts or in a critical journal—the narrative changes, because we are no longer able to read it without knowledge of the paratextual revolt.

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Chinua Achebe's charges of racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a case in point. By remapping the resonances of the characters and events in that narrative, Achebe alters that narrative by literally adding text to the document space of the novel. Achebe locates passages in which Africans are represented and counts the instances in which Conrad has the characters speak (twice: once to express a desire to eat a white man, and a second to say "Mistah Kurtz—he dead") (Achebe 9). He gathers other writings by Conrad, including an appalling account of his first encounter with a "buck nigger" and the "blind, furious, unreasoning rage" it evoked in him ever after (13). The opinions of other critics are cited, including the (still prevalent) idea that Africa "is merely the setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz" (12). All of these procedures—quotation, summary, paraphrase, conjecture—come precisely as a result of having said, "Let's see what happens when I do *this*"; the "this" is a rewritten *Heart of Darkness*.

Such representations are hardly impotent. The consequences of a *Heart of Darkness* rewritten so as to expose its racism will have the tangible effect of limiting (and in some cases, destroying) many of the other narrative possibilities with which it is inextricably linked. It may even have the result of ensuring that this narrative, which Achebe calls "offensive and deplorable," is dropped from course syllabi—in effect guaranteeing that certain types of transformations are never undertaken again (14). Aarseth continues:

> The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention. Trying to know a cybertext is an investment of personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure. The tensions at work in a cybertext, while not incompatible with those of narrative desire, are also something more: a struggle not merely for interpretative insight but also for narrative control: "I want this text to tell my story; the story could not be without me." In some cases this is literally true. (4)

But again, is it not literally true whenever anyone tries to explain what a narrative means (such explanations being the only tangible evidence we have of a reading experience)? In Achebe's article this desire to make the text tell a different story is palpably evident, since he proposes that *Heart of Darkness* does not tell his story and must now be made to do so. Achebe's story does not metaphorically intervene in this case; it literally intervenes—reinscribing the words of the text of the book itself—in order to demonstrate that the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* "cannot be" without his story. Terms like "intervention" and "struggle for narrative control" describe perfectly those interpretative actions (which is to say, all interpretative actions) that create an alternative version of the text itself.

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The interest that the *I Ching* holds for the student of new (or old) media lies in the singularity of form that these narrative interventions and struggles for control assume, not in the fact that one may (as with any text) intervene and attempt to control its meaning. Throwing coins to choose texts, while an interesting and essential feature of this particular text, remains one of the least significant elements in terms of one's ability to engage in these practices. One narrative possibility of the *I Ching*—one that attempts to make the book tell my story—understands the passage of hexagram 21 to 17 as relating directly to the writing of this book. The idea for this work came in the midst of other work. Pursuing this project therefore meant "sacrificing" work to which I felt metaphorically "shackled." Before undertaking the project, I exchanged a series of e-mails with a colleague in which we "disputed" the viability of the topic—disputes that nonetheless had the "favorable" result of convincing me to pursue the work. Once I set myself to the task of explicating the relationship between computer analysis of texts and literary critical practice, I found that I had to "bite through" a series of difficult articulations punctuated with what seemed like "pointed" problems I was discussing (the "bronze arrow" and "golden bronze" of the line statements). At one point I managed to erase the file I was working on (unmistakably prophesied in the final prognostic: "DISASTER"). Hexagram 17 presumably forecasts the successful conclusion of the work, which, considering the lessons learned from having once erased the file, will indeed be "guarded" when it is "brought in bounds" to the printer.

This is not essentially different from saying that Tennyson's "In Memoriam" speaks to me or that Sartre's *Les Mots* is the story of my life. Nor is it fundamentally different from saying that the former draws upon contemporary accounts of geological and evolutionary time, or that the latter is most successfully elucidated with reference to Heidegger. Here I am re-presenting the text so that it speaks literally about my life.[4] The source of this knowledge comes either from my own inventiveness (or perversity) as a reader, or from the fact that the mantic qualities of the text are literally true. In either case—in all cases—I am presenting a new text that imputes or denies authority to the original text itself, legitimizing or de-legitimizing its claims to truth value, proclaiming its power to mean or demonstrating my own power to do the same.

The power dynamics of the alternative text are equally visible in the hands of eighteenth-century Jesuit missionaries eager to demonstrate the ways in which the ancient Chinese classics might be adapted to Christianity. Jean-François Foucquet, despite papal condemnation of such "accommodationist" strategies, tried to show how the *I Ching* parallels the Old Testament (Rutt 63). Hexagram 13, for example, became a text about the Fall of Man (here quoted in James Legge's 1882 translation):

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Thung Zăn (or "Union of men") appears here (as we find it) in the (remote districts of the) country, indicating progress and success. It will be advantageous to cross the great stream. It will be advantageous to maintain the firm correctness of the superior man.

1. The first NINE, undivided, (shows the representative of) the union of men just issuing from his gate. There will be no error.
2. The second SIX, divided, (shows the representative of) the union of men in relation with his kindred. There will be occasion for regret.
3. The third NINE, undivided, (shows its subject) with his arms hidden in the thick grass, and at the top of a high mound. (But) for three years he makes no demonstration.
4. The fourth NINE, undivided, (shows its subject) mounted on the city wall; but he does not proceed to make the attack (he contemplates). There will be good fortune.
5. In the fifth NINE undivided, (the representative of) the union of men first wails and cries out, then laughs. His great host conquers, and he (and the subject of the second line) meet together.
6. The topmost *NINE,* undivided, (shows the representative of) the union of men in the suburbs. There will be no occasion of repentance. (86–87)

If we read the hexagram within this rubric, the message seems clear. But to read within a rubric is precisely to impose a set of procedures upon a text. In this case the motives for those procedures are religious and political. The English Bible and the *I Ching* cross-fertilize each other in such a way as to bring "the superior man," "men just issuing from his gate," "men in relation to his kindred," and "There will be no occasion of repentance" to the forefront of our attention. Phrases like "arms hidden in the thick grass" and "the union of men in the suburbs," though perhaps eminently meaningful to a feudal ruler about to wage war, recede into the background of our attention.

Even in the case of the *I Ching*, we can see examples of reading practices that strongly resemble Achebe's attempt to alter the permissible meanings of that text. The Song philosopher Shao Yong discovered a coherent mathematical order to the hexagrams, which was then presumed to be the original order. So effective was his attempt at authorization that it would later come to be known as the *Xiantin*—the "earlier than heaven" sequence (Rutt 90). More famous still are the reformations undertaken by Confucians of the late Han dynasty, who, in an effort to validate the great classic for Confucian scholars (no doubt hesitant, given Confucius's legendary opposition to divination), came to associate the text with the golden age of Confucianism during the Zhou period. Eventually the story came to be told that Confucius himself admired the *I Ching:*

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> This idea, which was current for a thousand years, depended on a single sentence in the Analects, the collection of sayings that is our only source for Confucius's teaching. In Legge's translation of Analects vii. 16, this sentence reads: "If some years were added to my life, I would give fifty to the study of the *Yi,* and then I might come to be without great faults." The Lu text of the Analects, now preferred by most scholars, has the word *yi* written with another character of the same sound, meaning not "change," but "also" or "more." This makes the sentence mean: "If I were given a few more years, so that I might spend a whole fifty in study, I believe that after all I should be fairly free from error." (Rutt 33)

Rutt notes, "This is likely the correct reading"—and it may be, in the technical sense—but it must be pointed out that this scholarly reading constitutes yet another attempt to reform the potential textualities of the text.

In most cases the creation of alternative textualities serves the ordinary purpose of allowing us to generate meaning from what we read. The patterns we generate—summaries and paraphrases, for example—serve precisely to select a narrow set of meanings from the field of all possible meanings. We may create this set either in opposition to or in cooperation with the rhetorics that we perceive the text itself putting forth. The *I Ching* is notable not for allowing this behavior, but for the way in which it generates a worldview from the consequences of this behavior. Whatever one might consider the specific contours of that worldview to be, it is a worldview (or perhaps a text view) liberated from the suspicion that subjectivity compromises meaning. We cannot avoid finding meaning in the *I Ching,* because our history, our circumstances, our desires, and our anxieties—indeed, the entire constellation of subjective interests we possess—form the inescapable precondition upon which the intelligibility of the text depends. Admirers of the *I Ching* have for centuries recognized the wisdom of this engagement. There is, of course, nothing in the text itself to contradict them.

Both the *I Ching* and the work of the Oulipo call attention to the always dissolving boundaries between creation and interpretation. Despite this, both productions are ordinarily considered aesthetic in nature and thus impervious to the objections often leveled against more overtly interpretative works. The agonistic relationship between artistic deformation and critical legitimacy are far more evident when a work declares itself as primarily interpretative, and nowhere is this anxiety more poignant than in Ferdinand de Saussure's research on pre-classical Latin poetry, the details of which form the subject of a number of unpublished notebooks written between 1906 and 1909.

The Greek-influenced quantitative meters of golden-age Latin—the poetry of Horace, Catullus, and Martial—were ordered according to a well-understood set of rules governing vowel length. The formal guidelines of pre-

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classical "Saturnian" verse, however, are quite a bit more difficult to discern. Much of the poetry is characterized by assonance, alliteration, and parallelism structured in such a way as to suggest a pattern, but students of Latin poetry have for centuries differed over how to state that pattern programmatically, even debating whether the form is accentual or metrical in nature.

Saussure begins his attempt at solving the "problem" of Saturnian poetry by focusing on those elements that seem clearly part of the prosodic architecture of the verse: assonance and alliteration. But Saussure's breakthrough comes from a change of focus not at all unlike the decision to read a poem backward or to impose Oulipian constraints upon it. Saussure sees the phonemes in isolation, unmoored from the wider denotative meaning of the poem, and begins to count them. He soon discovers that while the pattern of syllabification in a Saturnian poem varies, the number of consonants and vowels in each line occurs according to a subtle but unmistakably patterned regularity. Put simply, most of the vowels and consonants in each line have an accompanying "counter" or repeated term. Those vowels and consonants that do not have a counter produce a modulo character that is then carried over onto the next line. Saussure deduced that the poet must be trying to fit the verse into a pattern of even-numbered alliterations. Failing that, the extra consonant or vowel would "overflow" to the next verse unit. "The result is so startling that one wonders how the authors of these lines . . . would have found the time for such onerous and minute calculation: for Saturnian verse, quite apart from any metric considerations, is like a Chinese game in its complexity" (Saussure, qtd. in Starobinsky 9).

That complexity, brought forth by the decision to see a poem in a way utterly counter to what we would normally consider reading, soon yields further patterns. Before long, Saussure is beginning to notice graphic and phonemic patterns that are themselves suggestive of a much deeper order. Considered in isolation, the common phonemes and the unpaired consonants begin to re(as)semble independent words, which, Saussure concludes, must form the "theme word" from which the rest of the poem is formed:

> Thus, if, for instance, we take as our THEME or TITLE (which is practically the same thing) Diis Manibus Luci Corneli Scipionis Sacrum, it will be necessary for the verse section of the inscription to leave free and unpaired, that is to say, in a number whose total is ODD, the letters D.M.L.C.S. |R.|
>
> Specifically, we have the first four letters because for proper names, and for consecrated formulas like Diis Manibus, it is only the INITIAL which counts. The last is R because *Sacrum,* conversely, must be taken with all its letters. But neither the S nor the C nor the M of *Sacrum* can be expressed because these letters already exist in D.M.L.C.S.—and if one added a new S or C or M to the verse section, all these letters would find themselves canceled by the even number. (13)

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Saussure also comes upon phonemes that recapitulate the vowel structures of the theme word, and that further cluster around particular sets of words between the initial and final character of the theme. These clusters he calls "mannequins." If the theme word is "Aphrodite," one will find mannequins like "Amnīs ită captă lepōrE" and "Ac montīs fluviosqvE" (63–65). In one of the more extraordinary examples of this phenomenon, Saussure finds amid Lucretius's invectives against the madness of sexual passion in *De Rerum Natura,* the word "postscenia" (backstage). As Starobinsky observed, "The word which distributes its phonic elements through the text of the poem is that in which, metaphorically, a depth of artifice, a place devoid of majesty, ruled by illusion, is denounced" (74).

Saussure modifies his thesis slightly throughout the notebooks. In attempting to name the phenomenon, he suggests not only "anagram" but also "hypogram," "anaphone," "paragram," "paramine," "paronym," "paranomase," "logogram," and even "antigram." But by whatever combination of Greek roots, the essential features of the phenomenon remain the same. In dozens of examples Saussure finds an encrypted message running alongside, over, and against the aural and graphic elements of the text. If one needs to consider the phonemic and graphic elements of the text differently in light of the anagrams, then this, according to Saussure, simply demonstrates that our conception of Latin phonology is flawed:

1. Every *u* for *o* must be assumed (in 397) to be in the condition of *o.* (But still, perhaps some internal *u*'s for *o*?)
2. Every *u* for *oi* is still *oi.* And of course, *u* for *ou* is *ou.*
3. Every *i* for *ei* is still *ei,* and the only question would be if, in turn, *ei* originating in the final *oi* were not kept as *oi.* I myself generally accept *ei,* and the anagrams seem to require it. (48)

Before long, Saussure is finding anagrams not only throughout the Saturnian corpus but also in golden-age Latin, Homeric Greek, and even in Latin prose.

Saussure was well aware of the questions his findings proposed. If it is true that anagrams appear according to a thoroughly logical and discernible pattern throughout a significant portion of Latin verse, then what accounts for this pattern? Was it simply a method of composition well known to antiquity but that has failed to materialize in any of the *ars poetica* that have survived? Or do anagrams "emanate" in some way from poetical language behavior—a sort of verbal subconscious lying beneath the apparent text? Or is it merely the case that any significant sample of text will yield anagrams (particularly when the interpreter is committed to finding them)?

Such questions seem so natural to us that we tend to overlook the obvious similarities between Saussure's apparently eccentric inquiries and the

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more ordinary act of literary-critical interpretation. Literary-critical insight begins with a change of vision—what Wittgenstein called the "dawning of an aspect" (*Philosophical* 194). Sometimes that experience is sudden and slightly mysterious, as when one notices a pun only after several readings of a passage or sees a connection between a passage of text in one book and a passage in another; at other times (in literary criticism, one should say most other times) the noticing is the result of some sort of overt manipulation of the text. We read out of order, we translate and paraphrase, we look only at certain words or certain constellations of surrounding context. The text hasn't changed its graphic content any more than the duck-rabbit changes between one's seeing it one way one moment and another the next. But the text quite literally assumes a different organization from what it had before. Once a new aspect/pattern has been discovered, one immediately begins to test the viability of that pattern. How often does it appear? How generally does it apply? Further alteration of the text is unavoidable at this stage. In the passage quoted above, Saussure both alters his text to meet his pattern ("Every *u* for *o* must be assumed to be in the condition of *o*") and alters his sense of pattern in light of the text ("the anagrams seem to require it"). Like any literary critic, Saussure deforms and reforms his text, revealing unknown aspects of its ontology—literally creating it anew.

The risks of deformation are of a piece with the dangers of rhetoric itself. "In short, we can see outlined here the risks of an illusion—risks of which Saussure was fully aware and for which a formula might be expressed in this way: every complex structure furnishes an observer with a range of elements which will allow for him to choose a sub-ensemble apparently endowed with sense, and for which nothing prohibits *a priori* a logical or chronological antecedent" (Starobinsky 44). In one sense, deformation is the only rational response to complexity. Nearly all deformative procedures (which include outline, paraphrase, translation, and even genre description) are intended to alleviate some difficulty, in the same way that Dickinson's procedure is presented as if it were the cure to an ailment. All textual entities allow for deformation, and given that interpretation occurs amid a textual field that is by nature complex, polysemic, and multi-referential, one might say that most entities require it. Seen in this light, deformation is simply a part of our permanent capacity for sense-making. But what if, as Starobinsky suggests, *nothing prohibits* that sense-making? Is not the entire notion of "sense" called into question if complex structures will always lead to the discovery of patterns that we can then call meaningful? It is precisely this fear of an eviscerated objectivity that gives rise to those rhetorical structures that work to conceal the deformations that lie between text and interpretation. Criti-

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cal discourse traditionally demands that patterns correspond to the content of the author's consciousness, or resonate in some way with sociohistorical "facts," or simply occur with enough frequency to merit naming. Anything else is open to the charge of being deemed either nonsensical or too aimless to qualify as critically coherent.

Saussure considers a number of possible explanations for the anagram. Perhaps the anagram is essentially hieratic in nature. Perhaps the frequent 4–3–3-3 blocks of syllables were originally magical formulas, or prayers, or perhaps hymns or funerary verses that contain the name of a god or other sacred word out of deference to the deity (or out of necessity for the spell) (Starobinsky 41). Survival of the form, then, would not be the secret passing on of some sort of occult knowledge, but simply that familiar linguistic/anthropological phenomenon wherein the form of a religious ritual survives long after the initial context has vanished. The absolute silence of the ancients on the subject of anagrams would therefore seem to indicate either a subject of extreme secrecy or a formalism too commonplace to require elucidation. Perhaps the anagram is merely the natural outcome of an ordinary aesthetic process. Beginning with the anagram, one notices a series of sounds and decides to work them into the verse, or the verse yields a series of sounds that one recognizes anagrammatically, and thus continues the pattern throughout.

Saussure considers the various objections at length. The question seems unresolvable from a historical standpoint; the ancients leave us with no reference to the practice whatsoever. Statistical analysis seems likewise futile. Too few anagrams in too few poems is as damaging to the validity of the theory as too many anagrams in too many poems. But in the end Saussure remains certain that his inquiries bear witness to some sort of truth:

> The "rules" representing so many accumulated powers seem to tip the balance in favor of accepting that anagrams are illusory. I respond to that with a certain confidence, committing myself to the future: A time will come when many more rules will be added to those we already have, in which the present stock of rules will appear to be simply the skeleton or framework of the complete structure. One will, on the other hand, have had time—since at present we have only taken up the most basic elements—to appreciate that the hypogram in itself is so incontestable that there is not need for anxiety, either about its actual existence or its precision, because of the many possibilities available for its various realizations. (Starobinsky 102)

One wonders, given the nature of deformative activity, whether any critical act could ever be considered "incontestable," or if, given the rubric of objectivity, the movement from text to interpretation could ever be free of anxiety.

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Saussure's inquiries into anagrams, written just prior to his famous lectures on linguistics, were never published. Apart from a few carefully worded letters, he appears to have kept his research to himself. Without proof—and proof meant conscious deliberation on the part of an author—he couldn't bring himself to announce the anagram as having critical value.

> As his study of hypograms progressed, Ferdinand de Saussure showed himself capable of finding an increasing quantity of names hidden beneath a line of poetry. . . . But if this approach had been further developed, it would soon have become a quagmire. Wave upon wave of possible names would have taken shape beneath his alert and disciplined eye. Is this the vertigo of error? It is also the discovery of the simple truth that language is an infinite resource, and that behind each phrase lies hidden the multiple clamor from which it has detached itself to appear before us in its isolated individuality. (Starobinsky 122)

The "multiple clamor" is nothing less than the text's status as a work already deformed, already mediated by the accumulated experience of language that produced it and that the reader must have in order to read it. It lies "hidden" only if we believe that the new organizations that arise from deformative activity are revelatory of something inherent in the text before the act of interpretation. For Saussure, there was no satisfactory argument to be made for this preexistence, no line to be drawn between the deformative act and interpretative illumination. Sometime in the spring of 1909, Saussure's studies of anagrams cease.

Saussure's anxieties are rooted in a basic assumption about text and meaning. Statements of methodology, generalizations about literary significance, surmises concerning authorial intention, and various other forms of literary-theoretical philosophizing about these engagements all give the appearance of existing outside or somehow above the textuality of the object under discussion; even when we speak of meaning as "in" or arising "from" the text, we nonetheless proceed as if the meanings we generate and the texts themselves were separate entities. This same belief does not obtain for algorithmic procedures, which, because they explicitly deform their originals, tread upon the rhetorically maintained separation between text and reading. Reading strategies based substantially upon such procedures, like the ancient practice of *gematria*, the anti-art poetics of the Dadaists, the backward reading of Dickinson, and the "random" textuality of the *I Ching,* lie entirely outside the reading strategies licensed by contemporary literary-critical practice. They may constitute clever forms of amusement, anarchic forms of literary protest, vehicles for religious insight, and perhaps even objects of serious anthropological study, but not serious literary criticism itself. Yet the genera-

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tion of literary-critical readings (as distinct from the more general activity of interpretation in ordinary language behavior) depends precisely upon such deformative procedures as that which Dickinson and Saussure suggest. To read a poem *as* postcolonial artifact, *as* evidence of generic protest, *as* cultural touchstone (the preposition in each case signaling the onset of deformation) is to present a narrative that depends upon a number of discrete (de)formal procedures. These procedures have the effect of creating alternative texts that form the basis of further elucidations.

This principle is amply demonstrated on page eight of the nearly two-thousand-page *Norton Anthology of Poetry.* There, students encounter a footnote to the Anglo-Saxon poem commonly referred to as "The Wife's Lament" that neatly captures the wonderfully beguiling duplicities upon which criticism depends, while at the same time echoing the combinatorial logic of the *I Ching,* the potentiality of Oulipian forms, and the anxious methodology of Saussure:

> This poem appears in the Exeter Book, a tenth-century manuscript collection of Old English poetry, immediately following a series of riddles. Different translations offer somewhat different interpretations of the poem; the one below suggests that the poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a wife separated from her husband. Some critics have suggested that the poem may be an allegory in which the speaker represents either the soul or the children of Israel during the Babylonian captivity. (Ferguson, Salter, and Stallworthy 8)

The idea that a poem might have an apparent meaning in addition to other analogical and typological meanings constitutes one of the core principles of criticism as such, with a tradition stretching back to the biblical hermeneutics of the Patristic age. Spatial metaphors suggest themselves, and our students intuitively echo the language of biblical exegetes by speaking of this doubleness in terms of meaning and "deeper" meaning. This footnote, however, subtly indicates that the doubleness here is more than usually problematic, since the editors felt compelled to note the obvious fact that different translations yield different interpretations. In fact, the "correct" interpretation of "The Wife's Lament" is one of the more hotly debated subjects in medieval studies.

The critic Jerome Mandel, in a book that goes by the magnificent title *Alternative Readings in Old English Poetry,* suggests that the poem "suffers from too many interpretations":

> The speaker of the poem, the "I," may be either a man or a woman who is either young or old. His or her lord or husband (1) is exiled as a result of a feud, (2) goes into exile voluntarily, (3) goes on a military expedition, (4) goes on a journey over the sea, or (5) is forced into exile by kinsmen who hate him or by revolutionary forces for political reasons. Either he returns or he does not

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> return. The wife is maligned to her husband or to another lord (from whom she has sought protection) for marital unfaithfulness, witchcraft, plotting against him, or some other crime. She is exiled once or twice, voluntarily or by force, into her own (or her husband's) land or into a foreign land. He banishes her because he has been tricked or he has not been tricked. She looks upon him as cruel for banishing her or for plotting some evil (perhaps murder) against her; or she looks upon him as sympathetic to her, an unwilling dupe of his kinsmen. Either she bewails her husband's altered mood (his hatred of her) or reveals her unqualified pity and respect for him who is guiltless and victimized. Or, if there are two lords, one may be cruel and one sympathetic to her. She must endure his hatred of her, or she must suffer for the hatred (probably the result of a feud) that others direct at her lord, or she must suffer persecution by the world in general. Her place of banishment or captivity is an *eorðscrafu* which is either (1) a ruin overgrown with briars, (2) a grove-dwelling, (3) a cave, (4) a succession of chambers as in natural caves, (5) a heathenish abode, (6) a prison, (7) some sort of sanctuary or monastery or nunnery, (8) an old and neglected but fortified building, (9) pit-houses or sunken huts, or (10) the grave (cf. The Wanderer 84). The poem closes with either a cry of despair, a prediction of trouble for her husband, gnomic verses suggested by reflection on her husband (or herself, or himself), an exhortation, or a curse directed either at her husband or at a third person (perhaps one of the mischievous relatives) who has come between them. (149–50)

The existence of so many competing, perhaps incommensurable readings of a work of literature is part of the normal course of literary studies. Mandel's extraordinary literature review, satirical yet clearly the result of a certain sense of frustration, captures well the ways in which minor alterations in a text—subtle changes of perspective and emphasis—metastasize throughout an interpretation. The paragraph almost resembles the control structures of modern programming languages: *if x* is true, *then y* is also true, or *else* we must default to a different set of variables or pursue a different procedure. The combinatorics of the interpretative field have elicited at least one plea of nolo contendere on the part of a critic, who, in a footnote to an article subtitled "'The Wife's Lament' as Riddle," stated, "No translation of the entire poem has been provided because any translation is tendentious, including mine" (Walker-Pelkey 242).

Mandel's own transformation of the poem begins with the simplest of procedures: he interprets (which is to say, substitutes) the "Ic" of the poem as referring to a man, thus rejecting the idea that the feminine endings of *geomorre, minre,* and *sylfre* ("sorrowful," "my," and "self" respectively) in the opening lines of the poem prove that the speaker is a woman. This change in perspective—ultimately, and most importantly, a graphic change that will be

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reinscribed into his article—radically alters the basic narrative of the poem. R. F. Leslie, an older critic often cited in the critical literature surrounding the poem, had called "The Wife's Lament" "one of the few poems in Old English literature dealing with the relationship between a man and a woman, and the only comprehensive study of a woman's thoughts and feelings"—a reading explicitly grounded in "the feminine forms in the opening lines" (3).

Interpreting the "Ic" as a woman allows certain forms of resolution by relating thematic aspects of the poem, but it complicates other aspects. The chronology of the events related in the poem seems particularly problematic when one follows through Mandel's exposition of the "ors" that radiate from that decision. This is where the rhetorical motives of criticism that seek to conceal deformative procedures are most evident:

> Most critics search for some order in the sequence of events which, they say, are presented incoherently because the speaker is a distraught woman. The lack of strict chronology reflects the poet's "attempt to portray excited feelings" (Chadwyk 31); or "the breaks in continuity are completely consistent with the ebb and flow of a woman's feelings" (Leslie 3); or "The intense emotion of the wife and the rather unsystematic organization of the poem in general indicates that the wife's hasty summary of antecedent action may be confused and unchronological" (Ward 27 [. . .]). (Mandel 150)

Mandel's paraphrase of the poem is completely counter to the one suggested in the footnote in the *Norton Anthology*. Instead of a wife who, having been placed in an "earth-cave" (*eorðscræfe*) by her husband's kinsmen, pines for her exiled husband, the poem becomes a lament by a man who, having been placed in "earth-caves" (*eorðscrafu*) by his lord's kinsmen, laments the tragedy of his situation. Just as a single grammatical assumption sets off this paraphrase, so the paraphrase alters the grammatical understanding of the most contested lines in the poem: the identity of the *geong mon* in line 42, the reading of the two *sy* clauses (lines 45–46), and the grammatical meaning of þæt, which governs the main clauses of the presumably gnomic end of the poem. Once again, the interpretation calls for a graphical reordering of the poem itself:

> I want to offer a new reading of these lines based upon the premise that the speaker is a thane separated from his lord. It involves identifying the geong mon (42a) as any indefinite young man with specific reference to the speaker of the poem. It also involves re-punctuating the sy-clauses. Heretofore, (1) *sinsorgna gedreag* (45a) has most often been read a variation of *breostceare* (44b); (2) *eol his worulde wyn* (46a) has been read as the subject of *sy* in l. 45b; and (3) the subject of *sy* in l. 46b has been the understood subject "he." Thus,

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> taking *sy* as optative, the *sy* clauses become a malediction: may all his worldly joy be dependent upon himself, may [he] be banished into a distant land" (168).

The *Norton Anthology* has this same line as "All earthly joy / Must come from his own self. Since my dear lord / Is outcast, far off in a distant land" (9).[5]

"The Wife's Lament" is the sum of its transformations from one text-space to another. It began (we presume) as a shifting set of sonic events, was inscribed onto the pages of a vellum manuscript, was transcribed into a diverse set of printed character formations, was translated into modern English, and now stands reconstructed in dozens of critical studies where it is commonly referred to by a title that does not appear in any manuscript. We might conclude that "The Wife's Lament" is a testimony to the poststructuralist insight that textuality is a shifting pattern of signification incapable of coalescing into any stable textual identity. We would do better to conclude that "The Wife's Lament" is a work that is always coalescing into stability by virtue of the readerly process of deformation.

Mandel's unusual candor as a deformative reader is perhaps licensed by the ambiguities—errors in transcription and transmission, for example—that naturally inhere in a medieval poem of uncertain provenance. But that is not to say that such operations are any less prevalent in readings of a less technical nature. Consider, for example, how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick summarizes her now-famous argument concerning the dynamics of male homosocial desire in the English novel:

> The subject of this book is a relatively short, recent, and accessible passage of English culture, chiefly embodied in the mid-eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century novel. The attraction of the period to theorists of many disciplines is obvious: condensed, self-reflective, and widely influential change in economic, ideological, and gender arrangements. I will be arguing that concomitant changes in the structure of the continuum of male "homosocial desire" were tightly, often causally bound up with the other more visible changes; that the emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality was in an intimate and shifting relation to class; and that no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole. (1)

This passage presents general conclusions on the part of the author and holds out the promise of a generalized understanding for the reader. Such guarantees represent the most common way we communicate literary-critical understanding; rhetorically, the passage has the effect of letting us know that Sedgwick's interpretation of gender dynamics will serve to elucidate the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. Yet one can easily trace the linea-

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ments of deformative analysis that led to her conclusions. Male homosocial desire is a "structure," a "continuum," and a "system"—a field of "patterns" and "relations" that she will soon make "visible" to us. Sedgwick's book is ostensibly about the English novel, but it is more fundamentally a presentation of these structures and patterns. Her reading, in fact, depends upon one of the most famous patterns in literary study: "The graphic schema on which I am going to be drawing most heavily in the readings that follow is the triangle. The triangle is useful as a figure by which the 'commonsense' of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations, and because it allows us to condense into a juxtaposition with that folk-perception several somewhat different streams of recent thought" (21). The triangle indeed functions not as an algorithm, but as something more basic: a pattern transducer—a machine for mapping one symbol set onto another. Rhetorically, it asks, "Have you ever read one of Shakespeare's sonnets as a triangle?"

Sedgwick uses this particular pattern transducer to read Shakespeare's sonnets in a way that is both trenchant and novel. She begins by acknowledging the "notorious mysteries" that seem to set the poems (and their readers) free from any stable extratextual environment: "whether they are a sequence, when they were written, to whom and to how many people addressed, how autobiographical, how conventional, why published, etc." (29). The interpretation relies upon an assumption that this absence helps to enable—namely, that the sonnets form "a continuous erotic narrative" played out among "the poet, a fair youth, a rival poet, and a dark lady" (29). Armed with the notion of a triangulation between erotic antagonists, Sedgwick is able to transform this perception of general pattern into a vision of these poems as erotic negotiations between men.

Sedgwick's graphical maneuver explicitly deforms the poem from one state to another. As an instance of language behavior, such alternate formations constitute the common currency of literary-critical (and much general human communicative) behavior. If one were to ask Sedgwick, "What does Sonnet 42 mean?" and she responded by repeating the poem, we would be within our rights to wonder if she understood what "meaning" was. To ask for an interpretation is to ask for more—and different—words. To present the poem as a triangle, to suggest that such triangles may lie elsewhere, and to use the triangle as a means for clarifying and elucidating the hidden, nondominant motives of a text is to deform with a purpose.

It is precisely the absence of this detail that renders Dickinson's suggestion (and the algorithmic criticism from which it descends) so strange. The apparent randomness with which she suggests the procedure and the implicit faith in that "Something" that will overtake the mind deliberately eschews those

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rhetorical procedures that seek to conceal the status of a text as alternative. For a critical argument to succeed, it must present its alternative text as a legitimate counterpart—even a consequence—of the original. Sedgwick can re-form Sonnet 144 into

love #1	love #2
comfort	despair
better	worser
MAN	WOMAN
right fair	coloured ill
angel	devil
purity	foul pride
angel	fiend
from me #1	from me #2
friend #1	friend #2
. . .	. . .
(30)	

because we are on the way to a justification for why the alternative text elucidates the original:

> The basic configuration here, then, includes a stylized female who functions as a subject of action but not of thought; a stylized male who functions as pure object; and a less stylized male speaker who functions as a subject of thought but not of action. Uncommonsensical as it may be, this conformation is very characteristic of the Sonnets as a whole, and is recurrent in the plays. What interests me here is not the devastating thoroughness with which the Sonnets record and thematize misogyny and gynephobia, but rather the ways in which that plays off against the range of male bonds and speaker's programmatic assertions of symmetry. (33)

Sedgwick's deformation is indeed "uncommonsensical," but as she herself acknowledges, that deformation has led to a "conformation" now made visible throughout Shakespeare's work.

By one definition of the term, "deformation" suggests nothing more than the basic textual maneuvers by which form gives way to form—the "de" functioning not as a privative, but as relatively straightforward signifier of change. But any reading that undertakes such changes (as all reading must) remains threatened with the possibility that deformation signals loss, corruption, and illegitimacy. Even now, in our poststructuralist age, we speak of "faithfulness" to a text, of "flawed" or "misguided" readings, but any marking of a text, any statement that is not a re-performance of a statement, must break

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faith with the ability of the text to mean and re-guide form into alternative intelligibilities.

Algorithmic criticism is, in this sense, nothing more than a self-conscious attempt to place such re-performances into a computational environment. But within this move there lies a fundamental remonstration against our anxiety about the relationship between text and reading. Those activities that are usually seen as anathema to the essential goal of literary criticism—quantitative analysis chief among them—will need to be reconsidered if it turns out that backward poems lie at the root of our forward endeavors. Our fear of breaking faith with the text may also need to give way to a renewed faith in the capacity of subjective engagement for liberating the potentialities of meaning.

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