1.3 Written Response

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REVENGE OF THE TEXT

Words very well might not only be written to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated, sometimes by humans, more often by machines, providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider what writing is and to define new roles for the writer.

While the writer today is challenged by having to “go up” against a proliferation of words and compete for attention, she can use this proliferation in unexpected ways to create works that are as expressive and meaningful as works constructed in more traditional ways.



Figure 1.1. DOS Startup screen on an airplane.

Watching the plane chart its progress is ambient and relaxing as the beautiful renderings of oceanic plates and exotic names of small towns off the North Atlantic —Gander, Glace Bay, Carbonear— stream by.

It stays that way for some time, until it illuminates again, this time displaying generic white type on a black screen: the computer is rebooting and all those gorgeous graphics have been replaced by lines of DOS startup text. ... Finally, the screen goes blue and a progress bar and hourglass appear as the GUI loads, returning me back to the live map just as we hit landfall.

If we frame that code and read it through the lens of literary criticism, we will find that the past hundred years of modernist and postmodernist writing has demonstrated the artistic value of similar seemingly arbitrary arrangements of letters.

Here’s a three lines of a .jpg opened in a text editor:

ˆ?Îj€≈ÔIəfl¥d4¨‡À,†ΩÑÎóajËqsõëY”Δ˝/å)1Í.§ÏÄ@”∫JCGOnaå$ë¶æ QÍ˝⊠ô’⊠å

p#n›=ÃWmÃflÓàüú*Êœi”›_$îÛµ}Tß‹æ’[“Ò *ä=!ˇ! Í=äÖΩ;Í”=!Õ

¢ø¥}è&£S¨Æπ›ëÉk©ı=/Á˝/”¨ûöÈ>∞ad_ïÉúö˙€Ì—éÆΔ’aø6aÿ-

Of course a close reading of the text reveals very little, semantically or narratively. Instead, a conventional glance at the piece reveals a nonsensical collection of letters and symbols, literally a code that might be deciphered into something sensible.

Yet what happens when sense is not foregrounded as being of primary importance? Instead, we need to ask other questions of the text. Below are three lines from a poem by Charles Bernstein called “Lift Off,” written in 1979:

> **HH/ ie,s obVrsxr;atjrn dugh seineocpcy i iibalfmgmMw er,,me”ius ieigorcy¢jeuvine+pee.)a/nat” ihl”n,s ortnsihcldseløøpitemoBruєe oOiwvewaa39osoanfJ++,r”P**[2]

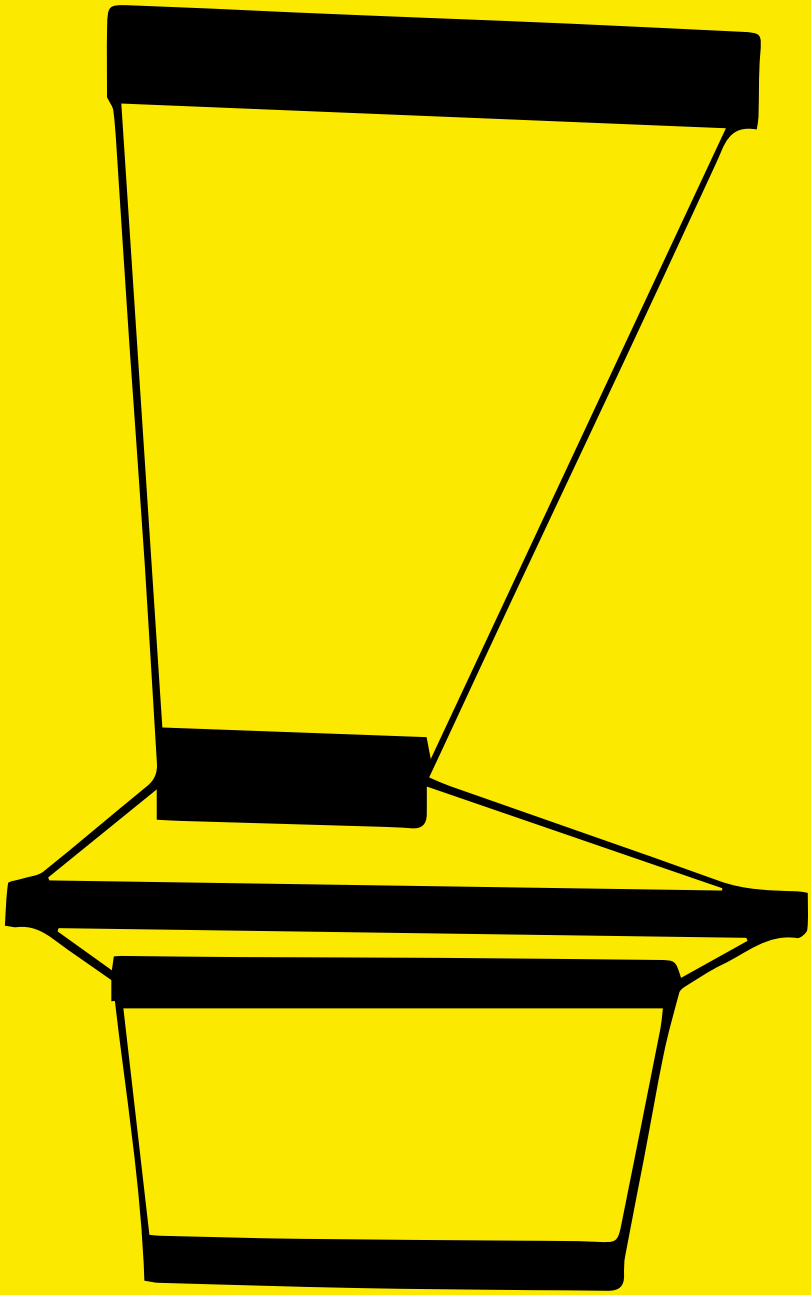
For example, you can see the word “Bruce” on the last line, possibly referring to Bruce Andrews, Bernstein’s coeditor of the journal **L=A=N=G=U=G=A=G=E**. But such attempts at reassembling won’t get us too far: what we’re left with are shards of language comprised of errors from unknown documents.

Mallarmé’s letteristic materiality inspires others to explore the same: whether it’s Gertrude Stein’s columns’ eye-tickling repetitions or Ezra Pound’s later Cantos, writers continued to treat words materially as the century progressed. Parts of Pound’s epic are filled with barely decipherable words comprised of dozens of languages jammed together with annotations and references to nonexistent footnotes:

> chih, chih!
>
> wo chih[3] chih[3]
>
> wo[4–5] wo[4–5] ch’o[4–5] ch’o[4–5]
>
> paltry yatter.[4]

“the paper intervenes each time as an image.”

- Stéphane Mallarmé



James Joyce's thunderclaps are the ten one-hundred-letter words scattered throughout Finnegans Wake, a six-hundred-page book of compound words and neologisms, all of which look to the uninitiated like reams of nonsensical code:

bababadalgharaghtakamminaronnonnbronntonnerronnuonnthunntrobarrhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthurknuk

Spoken aloud, it's the sound of thunder.

Computer code, made up of numbers—1s and 0s—can't possibly have any literary or aesthetic value. Or can it? "Seven Numbers Poems" by British poet Neil Mills, published in 1971:

1,9
1,1,9
1,1,1,9
9
1,1,1,1,9
8,4
1,1,1,1,1,9
8,4
8,4

If you read it aloud, you'll find it transform from a seemingly random bunch of numbers into a complex and beautiful rhythmic poem.

“I believed that the meaning which emerged in the reading of poetry lay primarily in intonation and rhythm, and only secondarily in semantic content i.e. that what was important was how something was read, rather than what was said—the human voice functioning as musical instrument.”

- Neil Mills

Let's take a .jpg of the famous Droeshout engraving from the title page of the 1623 First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays and change the extension from .jpg to .txt. When we open it in a text editor, we'll see garbled code. Now let's insert his ninety-third sonnet into it, three times at somewhat equal intervals, and save the file and change the extension back to .jpg.

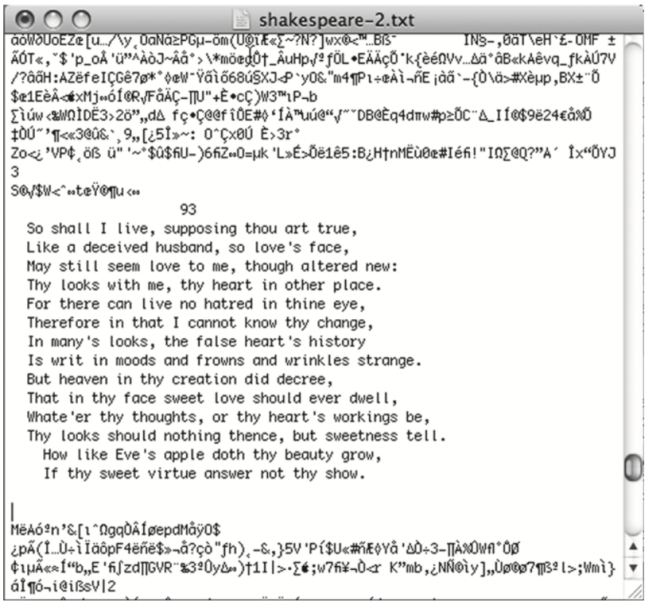


Figure 1.2. Inserting Shakespeare's 93d sonnet three times into the source code of an image.

When we reopen it as an image, the effect that language had upon the image is clear:

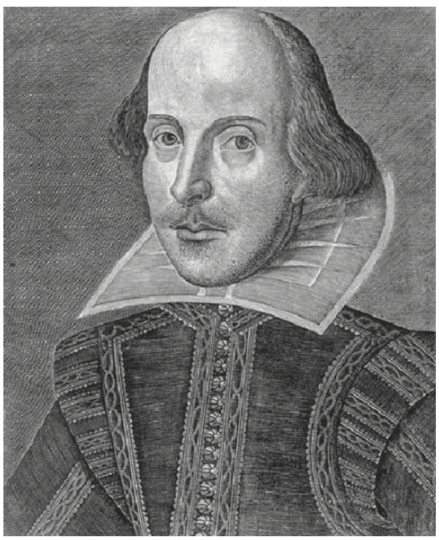




Figure 1.3. The Droeshout Engraving before.
Figure 1.4. The Droeshout Engraving, after inserting text.

REFERENCES:

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