

Criticism and Truth

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Does literary criticism tell truths about the world? This is a question scholars of literature don't often ask, or don't often ask directly, but it gets to the heart of how work in the discipline is done and why the discipline exists in the first place. One way to answer the question is to examine whether criticism attempts to make true statements about literary texts and, if so, by what means its statements are judged as true or false. How do we encounter and interact with our objects of study? Where does our writing begin and the writing we're writing about end? How are consensus judgments about the validity or perspicuity or elegance of a reading made? Another way to come at this question is to examine whether criticism is capable in some fashion of telling truths about the world itself, not just the small piece of it called literature. Does criticism about ecology or consciousness, to take examples from my own work (and feel free to insert your own), tell some truth about ecology or consciousness themselves? I think we'd all like to believe that it does, but how? Both lines of inquiry take aim at method and therefore at epistemology. They ask how critical practice—writing about writing—purports to convey knowledge, whether that is knowledge about literature or knowledge about the world in which literature is one part. This essay is a preliminary effort to consider these two sides of the relation between criticism and truth.

Method has been a hot topic in literary studies as of late. So much so that Rita Felski's 2014 term "method wars" for debates between various types of reading and quarrels over the status of critique seems to have stuck.¹ A survey of the relevant essays and book chapters, however, might lead one to wonder whether we have been fighting about method at all. Felski claimed that the debates in which she was interested were about "the various procedures

1. Rita Felski, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 45 (Spring 2014): v.

and practices that inform our encounter with a text,” but their actual content always seemed to be about something else.² Just when we might have expected a discussion of how arguments in literary studies are made, the topic turned instead, in Felski and Elizabeth Anker’s words, to matters of “tone, attitude, or sensibility,” to “ethos or affect.”³ It is for this reason hard not to agree with David Kurnick’s assessment that “although it has become common to refer to this miniature tradition as about method,” the critical texts at the center of these debates “offer not new ways to interpret texts but new ways to feel about ourselves when we do.”⁴ Kurnick goes on to provide a bravura account of these feelings, ranging from paranoia to joy to suspicion to pleasure. I’d like to take up the other part of his insight: that what is missing from our talk about method is method, our actual on-the-ground procedures of reading and interpretation. There is if one looks a loose consensus when it comes to our methods, I think, even as there is disagreement in our talk about method. We just haven’t yet or haven’t recently paused to look at them carefully. Method talk should, but hasn’t really, included reflections on everyday practice.

That is a shame. Methods are distinct from the topics and feelings that accompany them, as fascinating as these topics and feelings might be. To think about method qua method is to consider how we make arguments and how our procedures of truth telling stack up against those of disciplines with which we sometimes imagine ourselves in conversation. To think in this way is important because methods ground the authority of any discipline of study, whether those in the humanities or those in the social and natural sciences. Every one of them has a distinctive way of asking questions that it finds of interest. Every one of them has a distinctive way of presenting and evaluating evidence, of telling the truth in other words. For some in literary studies, the best way to ground the authority of the discipline is to look

2. Ibid.

3. Elizabeth S. Anker and Felski, “Introduction,” *Critique and Post Critique*, ed. Anker and Felski (Durham, N.C., 2017), p. 1. In Felski’s book-length treatment, the target is sometimes “mood and method” and sometimes just “mood” alone. As elsewhere, however, “method” turns out to be a generic term under which various mood clusters fall (suspicion, pleasure, and others) rather than a word for the procedures and norms of analysis and argument (Felski, *The Limits of Critique* [Chicago, 2015], p. 1).

4. David Kurnick, “A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas,” *English Literary History* 87 (Summer 2020): 351. Kurnick refers here to the familiar roster of essays on reparative, surface, and unsuspecting reading by Felski, Eve Sedgwick, Steven Best and Sharon Marcus, and Heather Love.

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elsewhere for procedures that might have more quantitative heft, to look at computer science or statistics for example.⁵ I will look instead at our existing practices to uncover their often unexpressed or overlooked coherence. I'd like in other words to get a sense of the method that already grounds the truth claims of everyday work in the discipline. To get a sense of these claims might be a good idea for several reasons: it might provide an account of the epistemic rationale of literary studies at a moment when some believe that the discipline has no such rationale; further, it might provide an account of interdisciplinarity that respects the validity and separate procedures of the disciplines from which it is made.⁶

Reading as Method

I have no desire to change the methods of literary studies. I want only to understand them. I want to understand the everyday practice of literary criticism as it is done everywhere, all the time, so as to make case for its authority as a discipline of knowledge. At a minimum, understanding the methods of literary studies would require that we understand what we call *reading* or *close reading*. Close reading after all forms the baseline competence for the infinite number of topics one might engage or the infinite number of arguments one might make. That is why revisionary movements in literary studies invariably take reading as their target, as the thing to do differently or in some cases the thing not to do at all. And yet what exactly is close reading and how does it work as an explanatory practice? The question is hard to answer because the practice is so sticky with respect to its materials and

5. This is not a gripe against computational literary studies as such, just a response to its not-only-occasional claim to occupy the epistemic high ground. See for example Andrew Piper on the "epistemological tragedy" of standard reading practices (Andrew Piper, *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study* [Chicago, 2018], p. 7). Such claim making is as unnecessary as it is unwarranted (and silly). Computational criticism construes its objects at a different scale from the conventional practices of literary interpretation, but that doesn't give it a more compelling purchase on truth. It just shows how truth—perspicuity, elegance, and persuasiveness in an explanatory context—corresponds to method. Seen this way, computational criticism needn't be seen to correct the practice of almost everyone in the discipline. It merely stands athwart it, doing something else. A pluralistic discipline should be able to contain both.

6. This essay contributes to a model of interdisciplinary I have developed in Jonathan Kramnick, "Against Literary Darwinism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Winter 2011): 315–47; "Literary Studies and Science: A Reply to my Critics," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Winter 2012): 431–60; *Paper Minds: Literature and the Ecology of Consciousness* (Chicago, 2018), pp. 17–36; and Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Spring 2017): 650–69 and "Forms and Explanations: A Reply to our Critics," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 164–74. Whereas these essays or chapters were more critical in their attention, I hope here, by focusing on the twin question of method and epistemology, to fill in the positive dimension to a non-reductive theory of interdisciplinary collaboration and research. The idea is that truth claims particular to various disciplines might be brought into dialogue on matters of shared concern, so let's take a close look at how our discipline tells the truth.

therefore so resistant to the kind of abstraction that might hold across individual examples. Any attempt to provide a definition of close reading would likely seem inadequate or hubristic. For that reason, I will instead shrink the analysis to a size on which one might get traction. I will focus just on in-sentence quotation, that is, on the practice of placing language from the text one is discussing inside the sentence one is writing in such a way that accommodates the formal economy of each.⁷ I will examine in other words how critics fold language they are writing about into language that is theirs. As with every other feature of close reading, this practice is not something we reflect much on explicitly, but it is steeped in norms of perspicuity, elegance, and evidence—norms of explanation that govern any field of study even as they vary according to field of study. I want to know how our practices of in-sentence quotation advance arguments, and that means I want to know what epistemic claims attach themselves to the ability to sustain person, tense, and other features of syntax across two orders of writing.⁸

This movement across two orders of writing is worth some emphasis. The expression “close reading” would seem to imply a particularly intense version of the ordinary practice of reading, an especially hard concentration on or attention to the written word. As an explanatory method, however, close reading is not exactly reading in that sense. It is not a species of the mind’s rapid decoding of the arbitrary symbols that compose a language.⁹

7. This practice is sometimes called *in-line quotation*, because quoted language remains within the line of printed text, rather than as a *block* with inset margins and without quotation marks. I prefer *in-sentence quotation* because the term emphasizes the syntactic and semantic unit rather than the layout of the page. *In-sentence quotation* gets a better handle on method, I think, because it emphasizes the relation among form, meaning, and truth whereas *in-line quotation* emphasizes appearance. Not all in-sentence quotations appear entirely in line (as will become apparent in my examples), nor are all quotations placed out of the unit of one’s own sentence printed in block. Indeed, the opposite term to *in-sentence quotation* is for these reasons better captured as *between-sentence quotation* than *block quotation*, even as the latter expression is inescapably part of our disciplinary usage.

8. My interest in the discipline’s everyday, intuitive, and highly skilled practices of quotation is similar in certain respects to Paul Saint-Amour’s interest in our “practice of writing predominantly in the present tense when writing about literary works.” Whereas Saint-Amour views “the literary present” as a matter of convention with implications for politics and utopian thinking—one he hopes to estrange by examining it directly in the past tense—I view quotation practices as skills with implications for method. We share the desire to draw out the largely unexamined practices that form a “disciplinary habitus” (Paul K. Saint-Amour, “The Literary Present,” *English Literary History* 85 [Summer 2018]: 367–68, 390).

9. It is not the kind of thing adequately captured for example by Stanislas Dehaene when he tracks “a printed word as it progresses from the retina through a chain of processing stages, each of which is marked by an elementary question: Are these letters? What do they look like? Are they a word? What does it sound like? How is it pronounced? What does it mean?” (Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention* [New York, 2009], pp. 1–2).

Rather, the interpretive work we call close reading is a form of writing.¹⁰ It is “a *genre of commentary*,” in Andrew Goldstone’s words, in which a critic writes about writing in order to pursue an idea or make a point or shed light on a topic.¹¹ Close reading as method thus involves the confrontation and commingling of one’s own words and words out there in the world. Such writing about writing is reading only in the metaphorical sense. Even so, we often lean hard on this metaphor when describing the work we do. “In the most common and least technical formulation,” John Guillory writes in a 2010 *ADE* forum on the topic, “close reading means paying attention to the words on the page.”¹² In the same forum, Jonathan Culler defines the “practice of close reading” as “examining closely the language of a literary work.”¹³ More recently, Barbara Herrnstein Smith identifies the practice as “reading individual texts with attention to their linguistic features and rhetorical operations.”¹⁴ Also recently, and as a contribution to debates supposed to be about method, Toril Moi writes that “whether I do a postcolonial or a feminist or a psychoanalytic reading, methodologically I do the same sort of thing: I read. And to read is to pay attention to the particular text, to look and think in response to particular questions.”¹⁵ Each of these accounts shares the hesitancy I just expressed to define what close reading is. None of them is striving for any particular originality. The idea rather is to say something original only after passing through a minimal description of close reading as a particularly intense kind of attention. I want to take issue with this minimal description however.¹⁶ When we model close reading as a type of reading, we remain within a visual and cognitive framework,

10. On this point, I have benefited from discussions with Caleb Smith. For his argument that the metaphorical description of literary critical practice as reading has allowed for interpretive position takings to present themselves as ethical position takings, see Caleb Smith, “Disciplines of Attention in a Secular Age,” *Critical Inquiry* 45 (Summer 2019): 884–909.

11. Andrew Goldstone, “Close Reading as Genre,” *Arcade: Literature, Humanities, and the World*, arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/close-reading-genre

12. John Guillory, “Close Reading: Prologue and Epilogue,” *ADE Bulletin* 149 (2010): 11.

13. Jonathan Culler, “The Closeness of Close Reading,” *ADE Bulletin* 149 (2010): 20.

14. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “What Was ‘Close Reading’?: A Century of Method in Literary Studies,” *The Minnesota Review* 87 (2016): 58.

15. Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago, 2017), p. 178.

16. As Elaine Auyoung has recently put it, “our reliance on *reading* as a catchall term downplays the specialized nature of our critical practices.” Auyoung’s argument that what we call reading is a specialized disciplinary practice is close to my own, especially her claim that “when we refer to what literary critics do as *reading*, we obscure how much their interpretations are shaped by unspoken conventions involved in *writing* literary criticism.” Her point differs from mine when she makes the further claim that “the term’s opacity obscures areas of overlap between these practices and those of lay readers,” obscures that is the way in which close reading is, finally and importantly for her, a version of reading (Elaine Auyoung, “What We Mean by Reading,” *New Literary History* 51 [Winter 2020], p. 94).

understanding it to happen when eyes fix on words and then transmit a code to a thinking mind. This model of laborious, visual concentration is seductive, both solemn and scholarly at once, but it loses the dimension of the practice better understood as craft. It loses how close reading is an expert practice of writing prose and making text, of weaving one's own words with words that precede and shape them. This practice is craftwork in a literal sense. It is something one does or makes with one's hands. The "reading" is typed or in some few cases handwritten. To the degree to which information comes in from the eyes to the mind it also goes out through the fingers to the screen or in some few cases the page. To get a grip on close reading as a method, therefore, we might want to turn our model from concentrated eyeing to hands-on immersion. That might give us a better sense of the kind of knowledge critics both possess and make.

Like most intensive handiwork, in-sentence quotation is a difficult thing to do. To knit more than a single word to your own after all is to accommodate an indissoluble grammatical epoxy; it is to adjust one's expression to the constraints of mood, number, person, and tense that belong to words grouped in an order. When for example Mary Favret wants to show how William Cowper includes in his domestic seclusion the sense of war happening at a distance, she begins with the framework set by eight words across two lines from *The Task*: "The noisy arrival of the post-boy intrudes upon the 'Winter Evening,' where the poet hopes to cobble out of 'undisturb'd retirement, and the hours/ Of uninterrupted ev'ning' a rural retreat from hostile weather and imperial hostilities."¹⁷ Consider the intuitive virtuosity shaping this moment from the everyday life of the discipline. Cowper's slightly out of balance parallelism forms a long prepositional phrase joined to the critic's own "where the poet hopes" by the silent ligature of a quotation mark. Favret's construction respects the grammatical and emotional mood set for it by Cowper's syntax yet nudges the picture of evening's fireside so that a soft presence of violence abroad somewhat disturbs the calm. The sentence "alerts us to unquiet" (*W*, p. 59). What follows is dramatic and deft. Favret spins her words across and over three lines from Cowper, whose grammar acts as a binding warp for the whole:

If, while gathered with friends by the fireside, he reviews in 'mem'ry'
 The dangers we have 'scap'd, the broken snare
 The disappointed foe, deliv'rance found
 . . . life preserv'd and peace restor'd,

17. Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton, N.J., 2010), p. 59; hereafter abbreviated *W*.

his daily anticipation of the newspaper belies the security of these past participles. [W, p. 60]

Note the performance. Cowper's three lines set the limits for what Favret may write about them. She has to make the "if" clause and the "daily anticipation" subject fit the contents of the memory at either end. As she does so, she discloses something about the poem. Favret's conditional statement holds across the entire sentence, but it encases the speaker's long indicative phrase in such a way that the past tense jostles uneasily with the expectation of what might be to come. Her words bind to the words of the poem to create a sense of temporal and felt disturbance amid a scene of calm.

This reading of *The Task*, like any other, turns on how the critic quotes the poem. To look at its method is to see the ordinary science of the discipline up close. Favret works within what is given to her, attaching her words to an already set grammar. In the process, she coaxes out of the poem a set of answers to questions she's interested in pursuing, in this case about literature and wartime.¹⁸ Further examples range across the limitless topics of interest to criticism. When Christina Sharpe wants to describe how a branded mark in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* identifies a mother to her daughter, a present to its past, and both to a sense of what it means "to live in the wake" of slavery, she describes the daughter's wish to receive the same mark: "The mother's response to Sethe's request that she 'mark the mark on me too' is a slap because she knows what the mark means and she knows, and Sethe will come to know, that she is already marked."¹⁹ Sharpe here sustains Morrison's play between "mark" as verb and "mark" as noun but turns what had initially been a piece of dialogue to a conjunctive phrase interpreting the daughter's question as a matter of black being.²⁰ The spoken imperative slips behind a pronoun and in front of a verb so that the six words now mean what Sharpe understands Sethe's mother to understand them to mean, the condition of "staying in the wake" and doing "wake work."²¹ Looking at older materials, Seeta Chaganti turns to several meanings of *oynement* for medieval writers interested in dance and the moving body: "Lydgate observes in an allegorical capacity that 'Oynement ys a soote thyng, And rhyt vertuous in werking To woundys cloos & ope also,' while Capgrave likens St. Gilbert's 'vertu' to an 'oynement' that must be stirred and rolled with tribulation in

18. For "why questions" as central to critical explanation, see Kramnick and Nersessian, "Form and Explanation."

19. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C., 2016), p. 49.

20. See Sharpe's argument concerning "the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings" (*ibid.*, p. 17).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

order to enhance its pungency.”²² A long phrase in middle English syntax and diction buckles but remains within the sentence of criticism, as an account of the animated materials of medieval cosmology comes into view.

Getting in-sentence quotation like this right is something one learns to do and is therefore a skilled practice. So on a first pass, let us say that the epistemology of close reading is a subspecies of the epistemology of skill. And let us add that quotation of this variety is of a different order from practices of block or between-sentence quotation. There quoted and novel words abut each other as separate units, like grouted tiles, the one noticing something about the other in terms distinct and set off by mood, diction, number, and other markers that distinguish one linguistic situation from another.²³ In both practices, writing criticism is knowing how to do something and the knowledge exhibited a kind of know-how. But only in the case of in-sentence quotation is the know-how that of weaving another person’s words with your own so you gently alter both, so that some sort of third space emerges in the process of interpretation. The question then is how does one move from skilled adjustment to the words of someone else to stating truths about these words? To use Gilbert Ryle’s categories, how does one move from “knowing how” to do in-sentence quotation to “knowing that” something is the case?²⁴ To answer these questions would be to understand at least in some provisional sense the manner in which a writing practice like in-sentence quotation both creates and describes a kind of knowledge. It would be to situate and understand an important piece of method.

22. Seeta Chaganti, *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2018), p. 20.

23. By its very nature, between-sentence quotation, especially in block form, would take too much space to examine closely in an essay about the contrary practice of in-sentence quotation. I have in mind such representative instances as Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1964), pp. 199–202; Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York, 1953), pp. 90–94; and Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London, 1957), p. 121. Less representative, but more legendary, would be Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J., 1953), pp. 525–28. Dorothy Van Ghent has the interesting habit of following her block quotations with sentence fragments, as if to glide the quoted language into her own words. Ian Watt does something similar by following with in-sentence quotations.

24. See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949; Chicago, 2000), pp. 25–61; hereafter abbreviated C. The “knowing how and knowing that” distinction maps imperfectly onto a precursor distinction between *technê* (craft, technique, or art) and *epistêmê* (knowledge) in ancient philosophy. One important difference is that “knowing how” is a form of knowledge, something not always clear in the case of *technê*. See for example Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 6, where *epistêmê* is a “judgment about things that are universal and necessary” and *technê* a “reasoned state of capacity to make” (Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross, ed. Richard McKeon [New York, 1941], pp. 1027, 1025).

Method as Skilled Practice

I have brought up the ordinary language philosopher Ryle for a reason. Ryle's mid-century distinction between "knowing how" and "knowing that" stands at the beginning of a still-ongoing discussion of the epistemology of skill within Anglo-American philosophy, one that might sharpen our sense of what counts as truth in a disciplinary context.²⁵ This discussion has several features relevant for understanding the activity of critical writing as a way of knowing. It asks, When is doing something well a skill, and how do skills pick out features of the world? What is the relation between being good at something and grasping what the thing consists in or brings about? These questions are germane for how we consider the act of embedding another person's language within your own because they examine whether the act would count as a mode of understanding that language and its world of composition and reference. Ryle's interest in social and linguistic practices shifts the location of knowledge from contemplating propositions to engaging what lies before you. His critics will challenge and muddy his fundamental demarcation in ways I will argue are important for getting a grip on how close reading forms an explanatory method. The original connection between knowing and doing, however, establishes an important basis for recognizing the activity of composing sentences from sentences as a truth-bearing skill.

What kind of knowledge do skilled actions exhibit and create? According to Ryle's influential distinction, knowing how to do something is of a different order from knowing something to be the case although no less important or meaningful for being so. In making this distinction, Ryle wanted to pry skilled action loose from what he saw as the "intellectualist" mistake of presuming a shadow antecedent to it in the phantom space of the mind. "According to the legend," Ryle writes, "whenever an agent does anything intelligently, his act is preceded and steered by another internal act of considering a regulative proposition appropriate to his practical problem" (C, p. 31). But this legend, he says, is entirely wrong:

What distinguishes sensible from silly operations is not their parentage but their procedure, and this holds no less for intellectual than for practical performances. 'Intelligent' cannot be defined in terms of 'intellectual' or 'knowing *how*' in terms of "knowing *that*"; 'thinking what I am doing' does not connote 'both thinking what to do and doing it'. When I do something intelligently, i.e. thinking what I am doing, I am

25. For a synoptic account of the know-how debates, see Carlotta Pavese, "Skill in Epistemology I: Skill and Knowledge" and "Skill in Epistemology II: Skill and Know How," *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 11 (2016): 642–49, 650–60.

doing one thing and not two. My performance has a special procedure or manner, not special antecedents. [C, p. 32]

Attention turns to the expert manner of doing something well, not to facts and propositions that might regulate that doing. Skilled knowledge is a capacity one builds up with “training” (C, p. 42). Ryle’s quarrel with “intellectualist” approaches to mind and behavior—his staged turn away from a dualism of inner deliberation and outward expression—thus had the corollary effect of making some activity seem full of mind. He opened up for sustained attention the idea that skilled practice was knowledge bearing.

Even as Ryle wants to distinguish skilled practice from the knowing of facts and propositions, he wants to make clear that skill is epistemically rich, not mere habit. “Knowing how” is its own kind of knowledge. That argument will be revised and revisited by Ryle’s critics, but the initial claim is especially germane to understanding close reading as a method particular to a field of study. “Knowing how” dwells in performance rather than reflection and therefore differs according to the various composition of the world. A method appropriate to one thing might not be appropriate to another. To make these points, Ryle asks us to consider a few skilled practices across the variety of life:

The boxer, the surgeon, the poet and the salesman apply their special criteria in the performance of their special tasks, for they are trying to get things right; and they are appraised as clever, skillful, inspired or shrewd not for the ways in which they consider, if they consider at all, prescriptions for conducting their special performances, but for the ways in which they conduct those performances themselves. [C, p. 48]

Deeply learned and virtuoso as the boxer’s or the surgeon’s performances are, they are nevertheless not considered if one considers consideration to be something that is distinct from the doing itself. And yet neither boxing or surgery or poetry or salesmanship is done by rote. Each requires training. I cannot get in the ring with a pro or sell a vacuum cleaner to a stranger without spending some time getting up to speed on how to comport myself in the activity. To be trained in one thing, moreover, usually implies that one is not trained in something else. Skilled actions apply “special criteria” to “special tasks.” To conceive of “knowing how” as a particular kind of knowledge is thus to imagine the world divided into particular domains: this sort of athletics, that kind of writing. At the same time, it is to imagine that expert performance gets something right within (and perhaps about) a particular domain. That is what defines it as epistemic and garners to it a kind of value, the value of being full of mind. Finally, to think of skill as the getting of

something right is to imagine not just that it has value but that it should be judged worthy of value. The virtuosity of an intelligent practice—its intelligence—needs to be recognized for it to stand. How else would a writer or a boxer or a salesman shine as performing well were they not appraised for the specialness of their special performance? It thus falls on some group of experts or connoisseurs to give credence to the claim that one knows how to do something well.

We don't have to adjust this model too much to understand it as a picture of expert knowledge located in disciplines of study, each with its own methods and criteria of value. To get a reading right would accordingly be to apply our discipline's "special procedure or manner" to its "special tasks" and to be appraised as clever or inspired for doing so well. And yet of what precise sort is the knowledge gained or exhibited according to this picture of disciplinary practice? Is appraisal a species of verification? These are important questions to ask because they return to the subject of authority and rationale. It would be nice if our methods got things right in a way that told us something about our special world of literary texts and artifacts if not the larger world of which such texts and artifacts are a part. How far does the idea of getting it right go in that direction? Ryle's distinctive contribution to the epistemology of skill was to insist that knowing how to do something does not require the application of facts from the mind and yet is full of mind all the same. The special knowledge involved in skilled activity is in the activity itself. As I have described it, close reading makes a good candidate for that epistemology. Once we dispense with the idea that close reading is a type of reading, we can move away from the view that it involves an especially hard concentration on written words. Close reading wouldn't have to be guided by the phantom antecedent of ideas had when reflecting intensely on words. Rather, its truths would dwell in the writing itself, in the loop that includes vision and touch in the thoughtful activity of the fingers.

Ryle's account of skill stops short of arguing that thoughtful activity of this kind amounts to a knowing of something to be the case. While knowing how refers to intelligent actions guided by skill, only knowing that refers to "the knowledge of true propositions or facts" (C, p. 26). I know *how* to cook fero; I know *that* water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit, and so on. Skills are full of knowledge, but they don't pick out features of the world, exactly. Here might lie the limits of the Rylean picture for our current purposes: the distinction between "knowing how" and "knowing that" holds intelligent action at once to be epistemically rich and unable to do explanatory work. What we want instead is an account of method that understands sentences of close reading to tell truths because of the competence of their assembly. For readings with embedded quotations, this demand covers the gist of the

entire sentence as well as the accuracy of the cited material. The quoted words in a sentence of criticism, as Donald Davidson puts it, “do double duty, once as meaningful cogs in the machine of the sentence, once as semantically neutral objects with a useful form.”²⁶ One should get both right. The parts of each wheel need to fit in such a way that makes a claim about a matter of interest. While the parts that fall within quotation marks need to be correct pictures of words found elsewhere, simple accuracy is not really the point (check your sources!).²⁷ Davidson’s more pressing concern was with the truth conditions of sentences that contain words both inside and outside of quotation marks. He wanted to know how to get from the competence of the assembly to the truth of the statement, from the “mode of the performance” to the “semantic character of the sentence.”²⁸

Considered in terms of the everyday work of literary criticism, the matter might be phrased like this: The apt placement of words made for the occasion among quoted words already connected is a kind of know-how, the truth expressed a kind of knowing that. What’s the route from the first to the second? Recent and lively debates in the epistemology of skill have taken up just this problem. The so-called intellectualist response to Ryle, for example, insists, as Jason Stanley has put it, that “knowing how is a species of knowing that.”²⁹ Stanley and philosophers like him mean to bring propositional and practical knowledge closer together so that to know how to do something is also to know that something is the case. The goal is to nudge Ryle’s conception of the intellect so that intellectually guided action does not require a prior, contemplative act of rumination and is not restricted to the mere gathering of facts. Intellection on this view comes to seem more active and is no longer “*behaviorally inert*” (*K*, p. 26). Stanley’s argument

26. Donald Davidson, “Quotation,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Method* (New York, 2001), p. 92.

27. Davidson is a critic of the picture theory of quotation insofar as it holds that what falls within quotation marks are *only* pictures of words, and thus only play the neutral role of having useful form for the shape of the sentence. He is not a critic insofar as he believes that their epistemic relation to quoted material concerns the accuracy of the picture; see *ibid.*, pp. 82–85. His larger point concerns how quoted words and one’s own words combine to make truthful sentences.

28. Davidson, “On Saying That,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Method*, pp. 107, 94. “On Saying That” is a partner essay to “Quotation,” taking up the related issue of indirect speech while posing similar questions about the truth conditions for sentences that contain words uttered by someone else.

29. Jason Stanley, *Know How* (New York, 2011), p. 35; hereafter abbreviated *K*. For Stanley and the intellectualists, knowing how to do something—drive a car with a manual transmission, say, or embed two lines from an Auden poem into your sentence—is a subset of knowing that something is the case because versions of such know-how answer an implicit question, of the order, “what is the way to drive a stick shift?” or “how do you wrap words around ‘Far off like floating seeds the ships/ Diverge on urgent voluntary errands’ without breaking syntax?”

involves “deflating the notion of *contemplating a proposition*” and putting in its place the idea that “skilled action requires being directly guided by one’s propositional knowledge—being guided automatically and without reflection” (*K*, pp. 22, 24). To transcode an imperative statement about the marks of slavery to an embedded consideration of the condition left in their wake is to work at once with words and their worlds of significance. The success at doing both would depend on being directed by what one knows about each. Skilled behavior comes to seem even more full of mind than it was on Ryle’s picture, as deft craftwork now identifies elements of the world and discovers them to be true. When one gets something right by following “the special criteria” of one’s craft, one gets the activity and the thing right.

I will want to dissent from some features of this argument too, in particular its order of explanation from the intellect to practice. All the same, I think it is important to recognize how the focus on activity more than rumination, on the doing of such things as stitching words to words without breaking syntax, makes for a good understanding of close reading specifically. Appropriately deflated, the “intellect” of the “intellectualist” response to Ryle fits with the special kinesis of literary studies. Knowledge resides in the fingers doing the writing as much as the eyes doing the reading. For a philosopher like Stanley, Ryle has too detached and contemplative a view of propositional thinking. He “over-intellectualizes the intellect,” as Alva Noë has put it, despite his invaluable attention to skill as laden with mind.³⁰ We might ask however whether the same could be said for the idea that skill is *intellectually guided* action, since that seems to put propositional knowledge in advance of its encounter with the world and so, as Carlotta Pavese has argued, to “prioritiz[e] knowledge over skills in the order of explanation.”³¹ The result is an unfortunate reduction. Favret would begin knowing something about Cowper, wartime, and clauses and then bring that knowledge to her dexterity with his language. Chaganti would begin with dance and philology before applying what she knows to her blend of middle and modern English and so on. Even this “intellectualist” construal in other words seems finally a poor description of the way in-sentence quotation provides an account of Cowper or Morrison or Lydgate and their worlds in the act of writing itself. Favret’s, Sharpe’s, and Chaganti’s points after all hold in precisely the way they have ordered their sentences: the conditional warping of Cowper’s indicative to reveal disquiet; the mood shifting of dialogue to draw being across

30. Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), p. 147.

31. Pavese, “Skill and Epistemology I,” p. 644. For a neo-Rylean defense of the distinction between knowing how and knowing that, see Ellen Fridland, “Knowing-How: Problems and Considerations,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2012): 703–27 and “Problems with Intellectualism,” *Philosophical Studies* 165, no. 3 (2013): 879–91.

generations; the cross-cutting of language to sustain the play between physical and metaphysical things. We would be hard pressed to distinguish or extract the argument from the composition in any one of these examples. There is I think an important reason for this. Arguments in criticism may of course be paraphrased or summarized, as I have just attempted to do, but the paraphrase or summary depends on the way the performance is done, as it is the performance not the paraphrase or summary that gets it right.³² The first is epistemically as well as temporally prior to the second. The truth of whatever is before the reading is not simply there for the critic to discover; it requires the active coaxing and commingling of the critic's words for it to take shape.

The shuttling of the intellect to practice that happens in the revision to Ryle thus does not go far enough. What we want is an account of know-how that describes the creation and discovery of truths in the practice itself, whatever that practice might be, so that what is "gotten right" is at one and the same time some sort of method and some feature of the world. The second should rely on the first. An "apt" performance as Ernest Sosa has put it is "accurate *because* adroit," "true *because* competent."³³ Some feature of the encountered world comes into view better because some agent has what Sosa calls the "virtue" to handle it with dexterity and care.³⁴ In-sentence quotation is exemplary in this respect because it is a practice of skilled embedding, whose claims for truth follow from an apt negotiation with and adjustment to (again) the indissoluble grammatical epoxy before you. "Knowledge and skill" play a central role in "opening up the world of experience," in Noë's words, because we only "achieve access to the world around us through skilled engagement; we acquire and deploy the skills needed to bring the world into focus."³⁵ This seems like a good account of close reading as handiwork, except one would want to add that the world doesn't just come into focus unchanged. Criticism is not simply the amassing of facts. If it were, then it wouldn't matter what form the engagement with other people's words took. The facts of the matter could simply be scooped up once collected. If the examples show anything however it is that the skilled practice of writing about writing makes something new in the act of interpreting it. The pattern

32. My strong hunch is that the priority of the performance over the paraphrase is why literary humanists still read talks rather than extemporize over PowerPoint as our colleagues in analytic philosophy and most of the social sciences do.

33. Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology*, vol. 1 of *Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, 2 vols. (New York, 2007), pp. 22, 23.

34. Sosa's position is a kind of "virtue epistemology" because, like "virtue ethics," the argument prioritizes the condition of the agent herself: "a performance is apt only if its success is sufficiently attributable to the performer's competence" (*ibid.*, p. 22 n. 1).

35. Noë, *Varieties of Presence*, p. 2.

set down in front of you only provides the enabling limits for how you go about asking and answering questions of interest along with the background conditions for how others appraise your performance. I now turn to the character of that novelty.

Creativity and Interpretation

So far I have made use of debates in epistemology to argue that in-sentence quotation is an example of skill, or apt performance, within a particular domain of practice. I have further argued that this performance ought to be understood not just as knowing how to do something but also as knowing that something is the case, with neither one having priority over the other. The knowledge that lies in the fingers of the critic is knowledge at once of both kinds. Critical truth is a species of craft knowledge in this respect because it comes into being through hands-on engagement with materials that limit and shape one's practice.³⁶ As a procedure of embedding another's words within the fine structure of one's own, in-sentence quotation forms the object it analyzes, so what spools out in any given sentence of close reading is a composite made to answer an interpretative question at hand. That final feature of the practice at least is basic to any hermeneutic method. "In a certain sense, interpretation probably is recreation," Hans-Georg Gadamer writes for example, "but this is a re-creation not of the creative act but of the created work, which has to be brought to representation in accord with the meaning the interpreter finds in it."³⁷ To provide an account of a work of writing you have to make it present in such a way that answers to your interests. The work is "brought to representation," as Gadamer puts it, but in a manner partial to the interpretive desires of the critic. Writing about the sense of war in *The Task* brings out just one dimension of a long and multifaceted poem, but such "accord" would hold even if the poem were shorter and simpler. Writing about a mark in *Beloved* alights on just one moment to ask about survival in the wake of devastation. All interpretation, on Gadamer's view, composes something new within the constraints of what it is given. The practice of in-sentence quotation I've been looking at

36. On the anthropology as well as epistemology of skill in relation to craft, see Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York, 2000), esp. pp. 349–60 and "Five Questions of Skill," *Cultural Geographies* 25, no. 1 (2018): 159–63. Ingold's examples include the string bag weaving of the Telefol people of New Guinea, in relation to which he defines skill as the environmentally situated manipulation and creation of material forms. "We recognise," Ingold writes in summary, "that skill is the ground from which all knowledge grows, that 'imitation' is shorthand for processes of attunement and response of great subtlety and complexity and that skilled practice entails the working of a mind that, as it overflows into body and environment, is endlessly creative" (Ingold, "Five Questions of Skill," p. 159).

37. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, 2013), p. 123; hereafter abbreviated *TM*.

is distinctive and special only because it so demonstrably embodies the recreating act, in which a new object emerges from the apt spinning of two orders of language. What is required for the reading to be apt is that it “be accurate because adroit, successful because competent.”³⁸ In-sentence quotation demonstrably embodies this quality because it puts the constraints and spurs to creativity so clearly in view as nothing less than units of composition itself. If the expressive shape of a reading coils around the words it embeds and interprets, in other words, these words place linguistic and historical constraints on what can be said about them. The situation is in miniature what Gadamer is after when he argues that “the fact that the representation is bound to the work is not lessened by the fact that this bond can have no fixed criterion” (*TM*, p. 123). Some statements lie beyond the joint limits of grammar and culture, but it does not follow that a single or even finite set of readings are all that’s allowed. “There is something absurd about the whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation” (*TM*, p. 123). Quotation happens in the process of making one thing from another. The critic brings the work to representation as she binds her words to its words, asking whatever questions are on her mind, her creativity as absolute as it is restricted.

That restriction may of course be broken by straining quoted language against the words in which it is encased. On such occasions, the intended effect is less getting it right, in the sense defined above, than having words seem to say something other than what one thinks they should say, a certain magnetism of critical mastery. So for example when Stanley Fish wants to argue that John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* stages the defeat of interpretation by having its titular hero become “a surface with no essence,” he presents Samson turning into a version of Delilah: “The result of having thus ‘divulg’d the secret gift of God / To a deceitful Woman’ is, he is sure, to be ‘sung and proverb’d for a Fool’; and what is worse, as one so ‘proverb’d,’ he has been reduced to the condition of being a ‘scorn and gaze.’”³⁹ Here the quotations add to each other as they progress, spilling into a second independent clause barely contained by the semicolon. Milton’s “rigorously worked-out logic” finds an echo in the critic, who makes the short-form agreement between parts of speech inside and outside of quotation marks sit in deliberate abrasion with the larger pile from which the quoted material is taken. Samson becomes “a kind of billboard, successively and passively receiving the imprint of someone else’s meaning.”⁴⁰ In cases like this, rigor amounts less to working within than to overcoming the limits of what is given.

38. Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology*, p. 29.

39. Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), pp. 472, 467

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 467, 468.

The effect of such overcoming may be dazzling, but what's lost are the generative restrictions on creativity entailed by stitching words to words already in a pattern. Literary criticism is unique among interpretative practices in this regard. It alone shares a medium with its object. Art historians don't paint about painting nor do musicologists write music about music.⁴¹ The point is simple but not mundane. The ordinary science of literary studies works with the same linguistic material as its objects. That is why there is no analogous form of quotation in other humanistic disciplines, let alone the social and natural sciences.⁴² And that is also why the interpretative act of criticism is inescapably creative. The epistemic virtue of a given reading cannot be separated from its making of something that has never exactly existed before. Working in a medium consistent with its object of study, academic criticism necessarily involves itself in the making of novel artifacts, whether at the level of the phrase, sentence, or chapter. To emphasize the creative dimension of literary studies therefore does nothing to lower its claim to truth of this or that kind. In fact, it begins to provide an account of that claim. So for example when Geoffrey Hartman started to puzzle over his manner of mixing his own words with the words of others, he described the practice as "both creative and thoughtful," neither one more than the other.⁴³ The closeness of critical writing, he recognized, blurred the line between text and commentary and thus was a kind of art form. "The line of exegesis" was as "precariously extensible as the line of text," each wrapping itself around the other (CW, p. 206). To write criticism was to make

41. This is of course not to say that literary criticism is the only creative discipline in the interpretive humanities, just that its mode of creativity depends on sharing a medium with its object. Art historical writing and criticism along with other forms of film and media studies have ekphrastic modes explanation whose creativity is methodologically bound to their objects in various, discipline specific ways. And of course it is also not to say that faculty in English or literature departments only write about writing or that faculty in other departments don't. Nothing in this essay is meant to constrain our understanding of what goes in academic departments.

42. By way of comparison, consider how linguistics and the philosophy of language, respectively a discipline and sub-discipline that work on language, estrange by means of nonlinguistic notation their written analyses from their linguistic objects. In for example a recent article I have chosen at random from a field leading journal of linguistics, the derivation of "who?" from the statement, "Mary has dated someone" gets rendered as "[CP whoi C[Q,wh] [TP Maryk [T' hasj [AuxP tj [vP tk dated-v [VP tV ti]]]]]]]" (Idan Landau, "Constraining Head-Stranding Ellipsis," *Linguistic Inquiry* 51 [Spring 2020]: 281). In cases like this, the skilled practice of the discipline consists precisely in surmounting the medium coincidence between the explanation and the explanandum. To understand something is to express it in maximally different form. Nearly the opposite is the case in the literary humanities, where, with the exception of some computational methods, epistemic virtue falls on varieties of closeness, including in the case of in-sentence quotation on actual blending.

43. Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (1980; New Haven, Conn., 2007), p. 161; hereafter abbreviated CW.

something new, to create “texts—a literature of its own” (CW, p. 213). At the same time, to think about literature was also to write about it in its own materials. Thought happened in that practice itself. One couldn’t think about literature, Hartman argued, without the creative practice of writing about literature. The work of linguistic interposition was at once aesthetic and epistemic, craft and knowing.

This distinction appeared in Hartman’s work as an unresolved tension between creative freedom and hermeneutic integrity, each held within a single practice of writing. Recognizing the inventive dimension to “writing about literature,” as he put in one of his balder formulations, meant worrying about the analytic dimension to the same (CW, p. 162). Keeping the two apart then allowed for the drama of their reintegration. Did the new object made from interpretative engagement float free from what it was supposed to interpret? Was criticism now at a unique stage in its relation to its objects? These questions were posed with some to-do. “The circle of understanding encompasses both the interpreter and the given text; the text, in fact, is never something radically other except insofar as it is radically near” (CW, p. 167). To write about something was at once to render it an object of study and at the same time to draw it into one’s language; it was to make it both strange and close. “The question What is disclosed by reading?” Hartman concluded, “invokes therefore a double text that remains a hendiadys: the text referred to by the interpreter, and the text on the text created by the referring act of criticism” (CW, p. 167). This is a notable selection of trope. In classical rhetoric, the figure of hendiadys substitutes a relation of equivalence between two parts of speech for a prior relation of subordination.⁴⁴ In the place of a noun modified by an adjective, for example, hendiadys puts two nouns joined by a conjunction: “pain and suffering” replaces “painful suffering,” and so on. Hartman evidently wanted to use this figural shift to equality among formerly stratified parts of speech as a model for picturing a new equivalence between critical and literary texts. The two would be linked but separate, held together by the very melodrama of reference that preoccupied his theoretical generation. That melodrama at once raised the stakes and clouded the insight. What Hartman describes after all is not two separate but equal texts; it is the single work that joins the two. There is only the text created by criticism. Cleared of the fanfare of reference, in other words,

44. George Puttenham calls hendiadys “the figure of Twynnes” and offers several examples, including “*Not you coy dame your lowrs nor your lookes*. For [*your lowrying looks*]” and “*Of fortune nor her frowning face*. . . . In stead, of [*fortunes frowning face*]” (George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* [1589; Birmingham, 1869], p. 188). On the classical origin and early-modern use of the trope, see George T. Wright, “Hendiadys and Hamlet,” *PMLA* 96 (Mar. 1981): 168–93.

a quieter end can be heard, namely, that knowing and creating have a peculiar and medium-specific bond in literary criticism. It is because they share the same medium that criticism can, in Hartman's phrase, "elaborate" on literature. It is because he writes about writing that the "texts that course through" him can seem "to be accompanied by a will to analysis that makes them stutter" (*CW*, p. 177). To begin where another stutters is to add words where another's stop and then to stop so another may continue. The metaphor uses speech to describe writing, as the metaphor of *close reading* uses reading to do the same. In the case of close reading, the metaphor is of an intense concentration on words translated into concepts; in the case of stuttering, it is of an "elaboration" within the linguistic medium of what is before you. The idea is less heated, but (I think) it gets a better handle on the way literary critical "analysis" adds to, subtracts from, and otherwise works with what gets analyzed. To write sentences of criticism is to work with what it is given, in its materials.

The practice of in-sentence quotation I've been discussing is just this analysis in motion, one instance of the largely unnoticed because after a time intuitive skill that puts substance to the idea that writing criticism creates something in the act of interpreting it. One imagines that Hartman had a sentence like this one in mind when he pictured himself filling in the stuttered speech of someone else: "When Wordsworth opens 'Tintern Abbey' with 'Five years have past; five summers with the length / Of five long winters! and again I hear . . .,' the drawn-out words express a mind that tries to locate in time what is lost, but cannot do so with therapeutic precision."⁴⁵ This unremarkable sentence from the collection *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* manages to fold the first two lines of "Tintern Abbey" into Hartman's prose without straining the syntax of his opening clause. To do this, Hartman's Wordsworth stutters at the second line, before he can complete his sentence by saying that he has heard "These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a sweet inland murmur."⁴⁶ Hartman avoids the awkward redoubling of his own prepositional phrase with Wordsworth's even as he sustains the fit between his and the poem's words on each side of the quotation. Like a seasoned gardener, Hartman knows how to graft the lines from "Tintern Abbey" precisely where the prepositional phrase slides into its subject. Wordsworth's own preposition lies pruned on the ground, as Hartman coaxes the poem to reveal a sense of enigmatic loss. The virtuosity of the pruning and the splicing is that they at once seem apt and go unnoticed, designed

45. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 29.

46. William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York, 2008), p. 131.

to answer questions Hartman had about the varieties of consciousness explored in the Romantic lyric. Does the sentence assert a truth? It seems peculiar to ask this, but the answer I think is, yes, of course it does. There is an implicit “it is true that” hovering over the sentence, as there is in almost all criticism. To say “it is true that, when Wordsworth opens ‘Tintern Abbey,’” and so forth, would seem peculiar because saying so doesn’t add anything to the rest of the sentence. The rest of the sentence remains true or false in virtue of its aptness to compel our assent, our appraisal of it as well formed, perspicuous, or adroit.⁴⁷

To think of the epistemology of literary criticism this way is to reclaim truth for the practice without holding it to standards of proof hostile or ill-suited to the enterprise itself. We may safely banish the specter of positivism from our commitment to the epistemic. Asking whether a reading is true is just another way of asking whether the critic has applied her “special criteria” to her “special tasks” and so “gotten it right.” This is neither to lower the stakes on method nor to give criticism a pass on evidence. It is instead to get a preliminary sense of how the skilled practice of critical writing makes and supports truth claims, as does the skilled practice of any other discipline of knowledge. If, in the case of criticism, the truth or falsity of a given assertion is inseparable from how well the assertion is made, how well the assertion is made is inseparable from how well its objects are handled. The epistemic virtue of a piece of critical writing follows from its modification of as well as adjustment to what is given. In-sentence quotation is just a particularly intense moment of this epistemology at work, as what I’ve called the grammatical epoxy of words set in an order establishes the limits and grounds for success.

In-sentence quotation is not literary critical method itself nor is it all of close reading. It is rather a point of departure from within that baseline practice, an underpinning of a foundation from which critics scale up to matters of tone, narrative, historical situation, politics, meaning, and so on. Even so, by considering what happens when one set of words embeds and entangles another we may reconcile our intuitive sense that testing a given reading by holding it to facts—“falsifying it”—seems opposed to the way arguments in

47. The idea of placing “it is true that” in front of a proposition in order to deflate the meaning of truth derives from Gottlob Frege: “It is . . . worthy of notice that the sentence ‘I smell the scent of violets’ has just the same content as the sentence ‘it is true that I smell the scent of violets’ . . . So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth” (Gottlob Frege, “The Thought: A Logical Inquiry,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, trans. A. M. and Marcelle Quinton, ed. Peter Ludlow [Cambridge, Mass., 1997], p. 12). The deflationary theory of truth that descends from Frege is important for my current purposes because it provides the grounds for thinking that once questions of “aptness” have been sorted no further question of truth lingers.

the field proceed with our equality intuitive sense that readings are or ought to be responsible to the features of texts and world they endeavor to explain.⁴⁸ Nothing invalidates a piece of criticism more than its breaking the fine composition of what is read, either by the force of error or the weight of brackets, ellipses, and interpolation. All the same, the facts of a given reading cannot be separated from the apt performance of that reading: “mark” is a matter of being *because* the pronoun and verb fit “mark the mark on me too” just so; “preserv’d” and “restor’d” are ambivalent because the conditional includes them and so on. There is no need to place “it is true that” before the rest of a sentence of criticism because the truth claim is implicit and embodied in the virtuosity of the sentence itself. The sentence is done well and gotten right or is formed poorly and gotten wrong. The words fit the explanandum, or they don’t.⁴⁹

By virtuosity, I do not mean spectacles of unusual performance that hold us in awe. I mean literary criticism as it practiced all the time, everywhere, as part of the ordinary science and everyday brilliance of the discipline itself. I mean the kind of thing you find when you pick up any journal of criticism and pass your eyes over an article of interest. Pause to look under the hood, and you notice that the everyday life of writing in literary studies puts in motion a suite of highly skilled practices of which in-sentence quotation is just one. We take these practices for granted only because after a time they become instinctive and pass unnoticed. Drawing them out provides a glimpse of the infrastructure of literary analysis, the unremarked-upon methods that guide more attention seeking acts of interpretation. Every discipline has a suite of such practices. Pinpointing those that belong to the study of literature at a moment marked by skepticism with respect to its long-term

48. According to the “correspondence theory of truth,” as Paul Horwich has put it, “the truth of a sentence or proposition is said to derive from the existence of whatever fact it ‘depicts’ . . . or . . . is built directly out of the relations of reference and satisfaction between its parts and various external objects” (Horwich, *Truth* [New York, 2005], p. 104). However, we can, Horwich continues, “be perfectly comfortable with the idea that truths are made true by elements of reality” without prioritizing how they “correspond” to facts or objects if our inquiry is sound enough (*ibid.*, p. 105). So much at least is in line with in other disciplines, according to Simon Blackburn: “Instead of facts first, with method analyzed in terms of its contribution to fact, we look at the methods first, and then describe fact in terms of the ideal endpoint (which we may never reach) of satisfactory applications of method. The question at the forefront of our minds should not be ‘what is aesthetic (etc.) fact?’ but ‘what makes for a good aesthetic (etc.) enquiry?’” (Simon Blackburn, *On Truth* [New York, 2018], p. 72). All methods on this view apply skilled practices to their particular corners of the world. These practices just vary according to the specific nature of what is being studied. Yet, according to Blackburn, the same order of explanation holds across them: method first, facts second.

49. The best argument against a reading is therefore to show that it is poorly formed, that the language of the text doesn’t fit the language of the critic: not falsification, exactly, but perhaps something near enough.

viability can't be a bad thing to do. In these contexts, it is worth the gamble to recognize that close reading isn't a skilled practice of reading but is instead a skilled practice of writing, not so much intensive reflection and rumination as intensive finesse and dexterity. It is worth the gamble because it allows us to understand that whatever claims to truth close reading has as a method come less from ideas themselves (as it were) than from the enactment of ideas in practice.⁵⁰ One should of course think hard as one reads, but "reading" as method doesn't start until one writes. To look at embedded quotations is just to see criticism and its objects gotten right (or wrong) in the fine structure of the performance.

That performance will vary every time it is done. Every act of criticism is as unique as the sentences from which it is made, each a singular composite of two orders of writing. That too has important implications for method, especially for how we understand the difference between the literary humanities and other disciplines of knowledge. One nonnegotiable demand of scientific practice for example is that its findings are replicable.⁵¹ Get an interesting result, and the experiment should be run again, by oneself or someone else. Successful duplication is essential to demonstrating that the matter has been gotten right. As I have attempted to show, things are markedly different for criticism. Do a reading the same way again to make sure that it yields the same result and you will appear to be losing your mind. Repeat the performance of someone else and you will be guilty of plagiarism. To argue, as I have, that literary criticism has a method that aims at truth just as the sciences do is therefore not to argue that it has the same method as the sciences or the same understanding of its method. Replication is important to science because, ideally understood, its results ought to be the same from any and every point of view. They ought to be objective in that sense. By comparison, critical results consist in one view held in a kind of braided tension with another, one's own words and words already made. Validation in literary criticism doesn't happen in the impossible or absurd practice of doing a reading again, because there is no result independent of perspective that could be

50. It lies beyond the scope of this essay to discuss pedagogy, but grasping the epistemic nature of critical writing might also help to provide an account of what we do when we teach. There are obviously enough vital forms of knowing that come from class discussion, as there are also from reading simpliciter, but the nonnegotiable demand that students write papers at tests, I would argue, to a tacit understanding that writing is an irreplaceable form of knowing in the literary disciplines.

51. For methodological and philosophical background, see Fiona Fidler and John Wilcox, "Reproducibility of Scientific Results," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 3 Dec. 2018, plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-reproducibility/, and Holm Tetens, "Reproducibility, Objectivity, Invariance," in *Reproducibility: Principles, Problems, Practices, and Prospects*, ed. Harald Atmanspacher and Sabine Maasen (Hoboken, N.J., 2016), pp. 13–20.

replicated. The epistemic virtue of a given reading is (once more) inseparable from the manner in which it is done. That does not mean however that readings are merely subjective. As the case of quotation amply demonstrates, critical practice dwells in the tangle between a singular and a shared perspective. Validation just consists in the institutionally grounded recognition that this tangle has been gotten right.

Sentences with embedded quotations are right (or wrong) in virtue of their grammatical form, the virtuosity of words or clauses made to fit individual dimensions of the world. When I use the term *world* here I of course mean language, the only kind of thing one could embed in a sentence. What is gotten right in this respect are usually works of literature, however we may choose to define the term. That is surely the main share of what it means for criticism to tell the truth. To the degree to which criticism tells truths about the world of which literature is one part—worlds studied by other disciplines—it is because literature has its own method, its own way of arranging the topics it would engage. Literature may only be one part of the world but it interacts with the rest. For this reason, critics habitually find themselves taking up matters of interest to those working in other fields. To list them would be to do an inventory of all the topics of plausible concern for criticism. That would likely be less useful than understanding the procedure that moves from a practice like in-sentence quotation to a truth claim sharable with a scholar from another field. I have described this process as inescapably creative, a making of novel artifacts from the medium in which literature itself is made. I would add now that such creativity extends to whatever literature itself engages, that criticism is in this respect a kind of world making. To understand how this is so—how a “reading” of a poem on for example the topic of harvesting apples might be of interest for a scholar working on sustainable agriculture—would be to provide the ground for ongoing conversations and collaboration among disciplines. But we can’t have that without recognizing that we tell the truth.