

Interpretation, Performance, Deformance

Jerome McGann's concept of "[deformance](#)" (login required) is a bit unusual and perhaps not easy to understand at first. It begins to make more sense, though, when you think of it in contrast to two other modes of apprehending or engaging with literary texts: "interpretation" and "performance."

To *interpret* a text is to recast its intelligible or rational content in your own words: to articulate what it's "about." If the work is rich and complex, this recasting will be densely layered and highly nuanced — by no means a simplistic reduction of the text to "the moral of the story" — but it will still be a reformulation of the text's meaning in the language of criticism.

To *perform* a text is to repeat rather than recast it. This repetition engages meaning, too, but not by rewording it. The idea of engagement through repetition is a familiar one in music and drama, where it's a given that each new performance of a score or production of a play will give the work a particular "spin," bringing out some aspects of meaning and (perhaps necessarily) suppressing others. It's not an alien idea with respect to poetry, either: read a poem aloud, and if you're doing a competent job, your decisions about which words to emphasize, when to pause, and how to modulate your voice all reflect your engagement with the poem's meaning.

McGann extends this idea of performance beyond oral performance, though, suggesting that translations and editions, too, are performances. The editor who must choose [which version of an Emily Dickinson poem](#) to print in a collection of her poetry must contend with the different meanings that the different versions may encode. The volume that results from multiple decisions of this kind is a repetition of Dickinson's work reflecting the editor's particular "spin" on the work's meaning.

In the translations category, we might think not only about textual translations — from, say, English into French or Arabic or Chinese, where nearly every word choice will involve an engagement with meaning — but translations into other media. The film version of a novel is a performance of this kind. So, too, perhaps, are [Gabrielle Campanella's visual translations of various works from my Fall 2011 Engl 170 syllabus](#). (Gabrielle made these translations — i. e., executed these performances — as part of her "optional project" in Engl 170, Fall 2011, fulfilling one half of her final exam assignment. If you're in my section this semester, the same option is available to you.)

And so we come, finally, to "deformance." A deformance, as described by McGann, is a performance that simultaneously and intentionally repeats *and* deforms. Examples might include reading (or printing) a poem backwards, from the last line to the first (an idea suggested to McGann by one of Dickinson's "letters to the world"), reading/printing only the poem's verbs, or reading/printing only the nouns.

What's the point of doing this? According to McGann, deformance, in disrupting or re-organizing a text's original order, can bring to our attention possibilities of meaning that we might not have seen otherwise. McGann seems to be arguing that these possibilities don't belong to the performed-deformed version alone, which is not simply a new work. The possibilities were there all along, though perhaps obscured, in the original. Deformance merely brings them out. It does this by putting us in a new relation to the work's form. (In Dickinson's words, "a Something overtakes the mind.")

Unlike [Sontag](#) (login required), then, whose case for engaging with form entails a disengagement with meaning, McGann seeks to unlock the possibilities of meaning within a text by deliberately altering its form. Where his approach differs from "interpretation" — of the traditional variety, at least — is in its treatment of the text as a "field" of meanings rather than as a form encoding a fixed, unitary meaning. McGann believes that Emily Dickinson, too, commits herself to that more expansive view of meaning in the first stanza of her poem #657:

I dwell in Possibility —
A fairer House than Prose —
More numerous of Windows —
Superior — for Doors —

I thought it might be fun to test McGann's proposition by taking the Poe poem [posted by Atheeqa last week](#) and reversing the order of the lines. [Take a look here](#). At the bottom of the document, share your thoughts about meanings in the original that the "deformance mode" brings into focus.