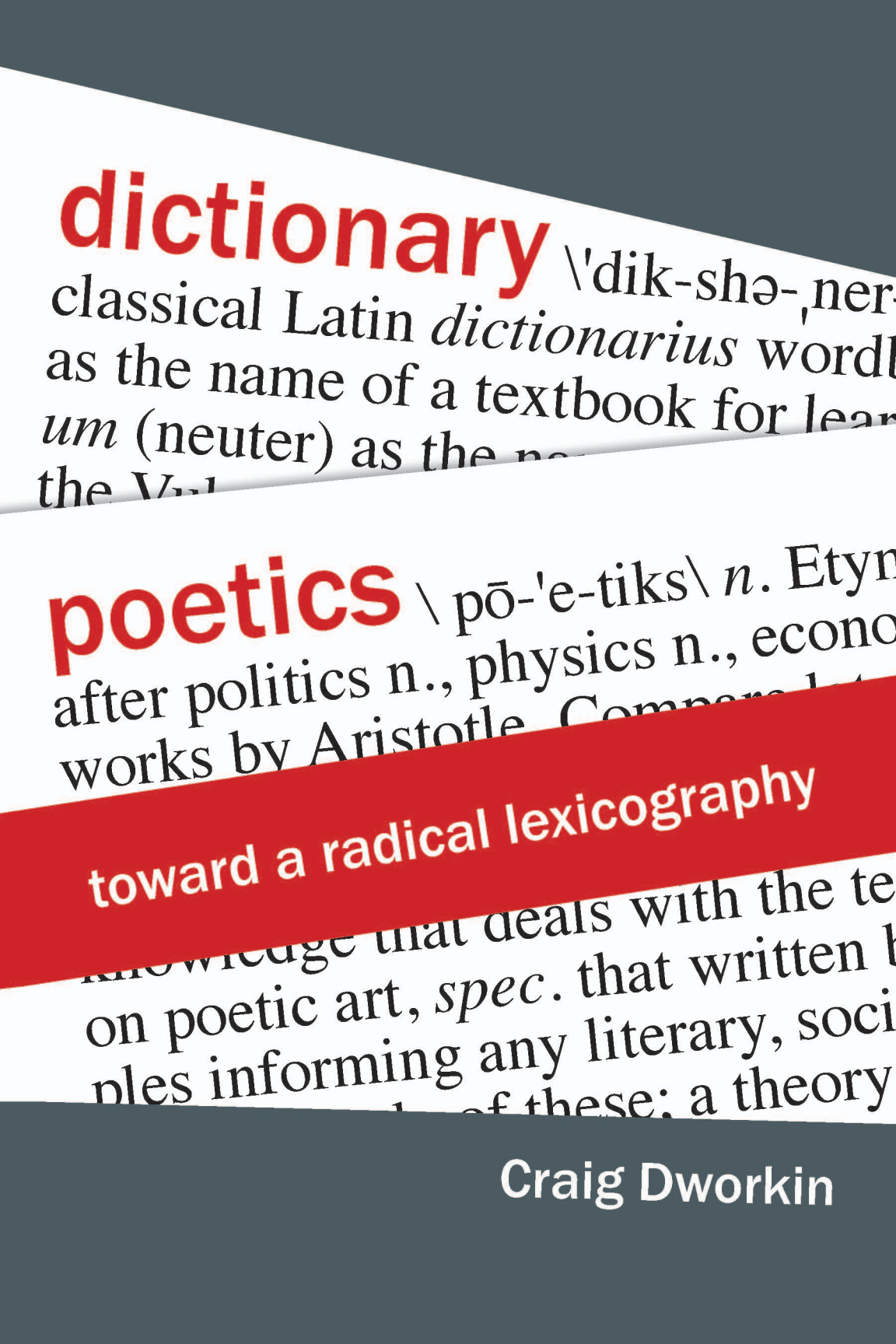
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Dictionary Poetics

Verbal Arts: Studies in Poetics

Lazar Fleishman and Haun Saussy, series editors

Dictionary Poetics

Toward a Radical Lexicography

CRAIG DWORKIN

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Dictionary Poetics

Introduction: Toward an Experimental Lexicography

> Neither is the dictionary a bad book to read. There is no cant in it, no excess of explanation, and it is full of suggestion—the raw material of possible poems.
> —RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "BOOKS"

> Different dictionaries will produce different results.
> —BERNADETTE MAYER, "EXPERIMENTS"

Surveying the state of literary criticism in the early twentieth century, William Carlos Williams decried the fact that most critics, seeing only chaotic clutter, "haven't the vaguest notion why one word follows another, but deal directly with the meanings themselves."[1] The fundamental premise of this book is that to read in ways less distracted by the "meanings themselves" and more in tune with the writer's methodology not only exposes and clarifies the pattern beneath the clutter—revealing the logic with which "one word follows another"—but also provides a more robust access to those meanings themselves, including meanings that are not discernable from other perspectives. The new ways of writing pioneered by modernist avant-gardes, in short, invite new ways of reading commensurate with their modes of composition.

When abstraction erupted in painting at the end of the 1910s, it not only changed the look of art, introducing a new formal language and range of possibilities for painterly practice, but it also altered the demands placed on art history and criticism.[2] Certain modes of *critical* practice had to be retooled or abandoned altogether in order to accommodate the ruptured illusion of the pictorial plane. Traditional iconography, for example, no longer made sense when faced with a monochrome canvas (or, at the very least, it required its own abstraction in turn, and an equally radical rethinking of what might be meant by an "icon" under the new dispensation). The same was true for musicology following the advent of atonality. The second movement of Brahms's first piano sonata, say, affords certain readings: tracing the minor-key deviation of folk themes in relation to the C-major tonality of the opening and concluding movements' harmonic

frame, for instance. However—even if one could reimagine what might be meant by "theme" in the context of dodecaphonic serialism—the very idea of a key signature is no longer meaningful in a thoroughly atonal context. At a minimum, a composition like the first book of Pierre Boulez's *Structures* solicits other musicological approaches.

Although modernist writers also began to compose in radically new ways, we have largely continued to read twentieth-century texts as if nothing had changed. The basic thesis of this book is that those new ways of writing require new ways of reading that are willing to follow their lead. If, as Louis Zukofsky, predicted, "there will have to be a / redefinition of writing," then there will have to be an attendant redefinition of reading as well.[3] As one first step in that direction, this book seeks to provide a proof of concept: Learning to read in the way the avant-garde writes can yield significant interpretive payoffs, open otherwise unavailable critical insights into the formal and semantic structures of a composition, and transform our understanding of literary texts at their most fundamental levels. As the following chapters repeatedly demonstrate, passages that at first appear to be discontinuous, irrational, whimsical, or outright nonsensical suddenly appear logically consistent, rationally structured, and thematically coherent when read in the light of an avant-garde compositional procedure. The analyses here allow one to make sense of literature that would otherwise remain opaque, cryptic, mysterious, or meaningless.

Consider, for illustration, the extraordinary opening of the thirty-eighth chapter of Jack Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*:

> Sword etc., flat part of an oar or calamity, sudden vio-dashing young fellow, lent gust of wind; forcible stream of leaf, air, blare of a trumpet or horn, blamable deserving of Explosion as of gunpowder, blame, find fault with Blight; censure, Imputation of a blatant Brawling noisy, Speak ill, blaze, Burn with a blameful meriting flame, send forth a flaming light, less without blame innocent, torch, firebrand, stream of blamelessly blameless flame of light, bursting out, act-ness, worthy of blame, cul-blaze, Mark trees by pable, paring off part of the bark, mark blanch, whiten, par-out a way or path in this manner. . . .[4]

The prose executes quick cuts between impacted rhymes ("sword" / "oar"; "flaming" / "blame"; "blanch" / "path" / "manner"), alliterations ("pable, paring" / "par" / "path"; all the *bl–* words), and modulated recombinations (notice the play of *f*, *l*, *n*, and *t* in "flat" / "fellow, lent" / "forcible . . . leaf" / "find fault with" / "flaming light, less," etc.). With that phonemic

patter and the paratactic phrasing of short, grammatically incomplete units, Kerouac's chapter presents itself an instance of "spontaneous bop prosody": improvisational, expressionistic, rapidly reorienting itself with the same abstractionist impulses on display in Jackson Pollock's paintings or the soloing of instruments in bebop.[5] The entire chapter continues in this mode, unspooling a patchwork of dizzying phrasal fragments. For all its abrupt disruptions, the style of the passage betrays its origins with what Clark Coolidge will elsewhere identify as the "syntax" of the dictionary, in this case, appositional series and the prepositional noun phrases featuring "of," "with a," and "in this manner."[6] Kerouac has pursued something like "prose in the state of its home dictionary," as Coolidge would write in one of his mid-1970s poems.[7] Without access to the particular edition of the dictionary at hand, a reader might suspect Kerouac of irreverently disrupting the coherence and authority of the reference book with extended flights of aleatory improvisation; the passage styles itself as a riff, or goof, or caprice. When read alongside his novel, however, the "Students' Graded School Edition" of *Webster's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* reveals the poetics in play to be both unexpectedly simpler and far more telling (see Figure 1). The lingering trace of the dictionary in the passage may be self-evident, but only through a comparison with the exact dictionary consulted by Kerouac—the specific typography of page 61 of that particular edition of the Laird & Lee *Webster's*—does the poetics behind the anomalous chapter become clear.

To begin with, even the page selected for transcription resonates with the novel, which recounts Kerouac's time stationed in an isolated fire lookout on Desolation Peak, in the Cascades of northern Washington, where lone scouts were tasked with keeping keen eyes through the cold nights. Accordingly, the entry for "bleak" in *Webster's* would have spoken to Kerouac: "1. Unsheltered; *desolate*; cheerless. 2. Cold; cutting; keen." The final entry of the page, moreover, ends with the word that came to Kerouac in a vision just a couple of years before, christening the literary movement of a generation for which he would be canonized as a patron saint: "Beatified."[8] Whatever the reasons Kerouac was ultimately moved to focus on this particular dictionary page, he was not reading straight down alphabetically, or skipping in ecstatic agitation from one impulsively chosen phrase to another. Rather, he is simply reading straight across the center rule as if the page were typeset in a single block of prose rather than in two columns.[9] The practice recalls the description given by Malcolm X of his autodidact lessons in a Norfolk prison: "In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on

sword, etc. 3. Flat part of an oar. 4. Dashing young fellow. [A. S. *blæd*, leaf.] [blame.—**blam'ably**, *adv.*
blamable (blām'a-bl), *a.* Deserving of
blame (blām). I. *vt.* Find fault with; censure. II. *n.* 1. Imputation of a fault; censure. 2. Fault; culpability. [Fr. *blâmer*—Gr. *blasphemeo*, speak ill.]
blameful (blām'fol), *a.* Meriting blame.—**blame'fully**, *adv.*—**blame'less**, *a.* Without blame; innocent.—**blame'lessly**, *adv.*—**blame'lessness**, *n.*—**blame'worthy** (blām'wŭr-*thi*), *a.* Worthy of blame; culpable.
blanch (blänch). I. *vt.* Whiten; parboil; parboil and skin, as almonds. II. *vi.* Grow white. [Fr. *blanchir*—*blanc*, white.]
blanc-mange (blä-mängzh'), *n.* Jelly-like preparation of sea-moss, arrowroot, corn-starch or the like. [Fr. *blanc*, white, and *manger*, eat.]
bland (bland), *a.* Mild; balmy; suave. [L. *blandus*, smooth.]
blandishment (bland'ish-ment), *n.* 1. Act of expressing fondness; artful caress. 2. Amenity, pleasure [O. Fr. *blandir*, flatter.]
blank (blangk). I. *a.* 1. White or pale. 2. Not written or printed upon, or marked. 3. Void; empty; vacant. 4. Confused. 5. Unqualified; complete. 6. Unrhymed. II. *n.* 1. Paper unwritten upon; form not filled in. 2. Lottery ticket which draws no prize. 3. Empty space; mental vacancy. [Fr. *blanc*, white.]
blanket (blangk'et), *n.* 1. Woolen covering for beds. 2. Covering for horses. 3. Broad wrapping or covering of any kind. [Fr. *blanket*, dim. of *blanc*.]
blare (blâr'). I. *vi.* Sound loudly, as a trumpet. II. *n.* Blast. [M. Eng. *blaren*.]
blarney (blar'ni). I. *n.* Smoot, wheedling speech. II. *vt.* Cajole; wheedle. [From Castle *Blarney*, in Ireland.]
blasé (blä-zā'), *a.* Exhausted by sensuous pleasures. [Fr.]
blaspheme (blas-fēm'), *vt.* and *vi.* 1. Speak impiously of, as of God. 2. Curse and swear.—**blasphemer** (blas-fē'mēr), *n.*—**blasphemous** (blas'fe-mus), *a.* Uttering or containing blasphemy.—**blasphemy** (blas'fe-mi), *n.* Impious contemptuous speech or behavior in reference to God and things sacred. [Gr. *blasphemeo*, — *blapto*, hurt and *phemi*, speak.]
blast (blást). I. *vt.* and *vi.* 1. Rend asunder by an explosion. 2. Strike with some pernicious influence; blight. 2. **Affect with** sudden violence or calamity. II. *n.* 1. Sudden violent gust of wind; forcible stream of air. 2. Blare of a trumpet or horn. 3. Explosion, as of gunpowder. 4. Blight. [A. S. *blæst*, — *blæsan*, blow.]
blatant (blā'tant). *a.* Brawling; noisy; blustering. [A. S. *blæten*, bleet.]
blaze (blāz). I. *vi.* 1. Burn with a flame. 2. Send forth a flaming light. II. *vt.* Publish abroad; proclaim. III. *n.* 1. Torch, firebrand. 2. Stream of flame or of light. 3. Bursting out, active display. [A. S. *blæse*.]
blaze (blāz). I. *vt.* 1. Mark trees by paring off part of the bark. 2. Mark out a way or path in this manner. II. *n.* 1. Mark made by paring bark from a tree. 2. White spot on the face of a horse or cow. [Dut. *bles*, pale.]
blazon (blā'zn). I. *vt.* 1. Publish or proclaim extensively; herald. 2. Emblazon. 3. Embellish; adorn. II. *n.* Art of accurately describing coats of arms.—**blazonry** (blā'zn-ri), *n.* Art of delineating or of explaining coats of arms. [Fr. *blason*, coat of arms.]
bleach (blēch). I. *vt.* Make pale or white. II. *vi.* Grow pale. [A. S *blæcan*.]
bleak (blēk), *a.* 1. Unsheltered; desolate; cheerless. 2. Cold; cutting; keen.—**bleak'ly**, *adv.*—**bleak'ness**, *n.* [A. S. *blæc*, *blâc*, pale.]
blear (blēr). I. *vt.* 1. Make the eyes sore and watery. 2. Becloud: bedim; obscure. II. *a.* Inflamed and watery; dim or blurred with inflammation. [Modification of BLUR.]
bleat (blēt). I. *vi.* Cry as a sheep. II. *n.* Cry of a sheep. [A. S. *blætan*, bleat.]
bleed (blēd), *v.* [bleed'ing; bled; bled.] I. *vt.* Draw blood from. II. *vi.* Shed blood. [A. S. *bledan*.]
blemish (blem'ish). I. *vt.* Impair; tarnish. II. *n.* 1. That which tarnishes. 2. Flaw; defect. [O. Fr. *blêmir*, soil.] *Syn.* Stain; fault; spot; speck; deformity; taint; disgrace; imputation.
blench (blench), *vi.* Shrink; quail; shun. [A. S. *blenkan*, wink, deceive.]
blend (blend), *v.* [blend'ing; blend'ed; blend'ed *or* blent.] I. *vt.* Mix or mingle intimately; confound in a mass. II. *vi.* Become so mixed. III. *n.* Mixture of different kinds, as of teas, liquors, etc. [A. S. *blandan*, mix.]
bless (bles), *vt.* [bles'sing; blessed (blest) *or* blest.] 1. Invoke divine favor upon. 2. Make happy, or prosperous. 3. Wish happiness to. 4 Praise or glorify. [A. S. *blessian*.]
blessed (bles'ed), *a.* 1. Happy. 2. Worthy of veneration. 3. Beatified.—**bles'sedly**, *adv.*—**bles'sedness**, *n.*

fāte, fat, tàsk, fär, fąll, fâre, ąbove; mē, met, hēr; mīte, mit; nōte, not, möve, wọlf; mūte, hut, bŭrn; oil, owl *then*.

FIGURE 1. Blamable to Blessed: page from *Webster's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1903), the source for a chapter in Jack Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*.

that first page, down to the punctuation marks."[10] Far from recording a performance of spontaneous improvisation or idiosyncratic whim, the dictionary reveals that Kerouac is in fact transcribing by rote, retracing the page, unwavering, with the reverent attention and undeviating discipline of a Sofer Setam. Starting at the top left of the page, where the entry

for "blade" continues from page 60, "[Cutting part of a knife,] sword, etc. 3. Flat part of an oar," his transcription persists, oblivious of the gutter, to the second column's entry for the verb form of "blast," which begins at the top of the column midsentence: "[Affect with sudden violence] or calamity." The "sudden" that Kerouac proceeds with, however, comes from the first definition of "blast" as a noun: "Sudden violent gust of wind." Kerouac records the dictionary page's hyphenation, returning to the second line of the first column after "Sudden vio-" for the fourth entry of "blade" to denote a "Dashing young fellow" and again continuing on across to the second line of the second column to pick up its "[vio-]lent gust of wind." The transcription continues, skipping the parenthetical indications of phonetics and foreign-language etymologies and omitting numerals and the abbreviated designations for parts of speech, but generally respecting capitalization and hyphenation as Kerouac ping-pongs from "blame" to "blatant" to "blameful" to "blaze" to "blanch" and "blanc-mange" and so on, back and forth across and down the page to "blanket" and its neighboring "bleed."

The passage, accordingly, is less like an improvised fantasia on the found material—or even the ordered, systematic resequencing of texts from the OuLiPo or Conceptual Writing—and instead is more like a variation of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's "fold-in" method: an extension of the radical collage of the cut-up method. Burroughs explains the technique, which he likened to a flashback in narrative film: "a page of text—my own or someone else's—is folded down the middle and placed on another page—The composite text is then read across half of one text and half the other."[11] In the case of the *Webster's* student dictionary, with its two columns, the fold comes readymade. With the aid of the dictionary, the chapter in *Desolation Angels* aligns more directly with one of the signature innovations of the postwar avant-garde, and it can be heard to more clearly take part in the textual dialogue between Kerouac and Burroughs that included their 1945 collaboration *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*, Kerouac's work on the manuscript of *Naked Lunch* (for which he would supply the title), and the direct inspiration of his "spontaneous prose" on Burroughs's literary experiments.[12]

Kerouac, it turns out, was not the only writer to employ the dictionary as more than a reference work to be occasionally consulted with discrete queries about individual words. Trying to stay as attuned to the minute particulars of a dictionary's textual disposition as Kerouac in his transcribing, the following chapters document a number of writers who have used particular editions of specific dictionaries to structure entire works. Spanning most of the twentieth century, this study considers the

work of five poets: Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen, two "Objectivist" writers of the late 1920s and early 1930s; Clark Coolidge and Tina Darragh, two "Language Writers" with books from the 1970s and 1980s, respectively; and Harryette Mullen, a post–Black Arts writer who flourished in the 1990s. On the surface, Zukofsky's hermeticism is a long way from Darragh's narrativized accounts of her own reading, and Oppen's terse, clipped snapshots are stylistically even further from Mullen's exuberant song. Nonetheless, this unlikely anthology corroborates a literary tradition that has been argued for on other grounds entirely. In a touchstone essay from 1973, Charles Altieri distinguished between "symbolist and immanent modes of poetic thought," as a way to understand the poetic theories that undergirded postmodern poetry.[13] About the same time, Marjorie Perloff similarly recognized that the most innovative poetry emerging over the 1970s had retroactively reshaped the canon of modernism, making some figures more relevant than others; as the title of her essay put it: "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?"[14] The Language Writers who were troubling the symbolist and romantic traditions of the creative writing canon were themselves actively interested in the Objectivists who had been excluded from anthologies like the *Norton* and whose works had gone largely out of print.[15] More recently, critics have gone out of their way to insist on the legacy of Language Writing in Mullen's poetry.[16]

Beyond substantiating and reinforcing this broad narrative of revised literary history, my analyses here confirm or refute more local arguments about the poets in question. In each case, reverse-engineering a poem with the help of its source has not only opened the way for new interpretative readings but also has allowed the critical record to be set straight on a number of counts. Among other points, consulting the correct dictionary establishes the true origins of the name for the "Objectivist" poets, which is found not in precision machine lenses as has been assumed, but rather in an eye disorder, as well as the direct connection between Zukofsky's two totem animals: the praying mantis and the horse. More specifically, because critics have been unable to locate the exact reference works credited in Zukofsky's *Thanks to the Dictionary*, they have been unable to establish the details of his compositional procedures, much less ascertain the significance of his deviations from those rules. Similarly, the dictionary reveals that, contrary to the received readings of George Oppen's early poetry as "not ordered by any overarching narrative design or 'rule,'" and posing riddles with unfathomable secrets, his "discrete series" is in fact connected by a lexicographic scaffolding.[17] The layout of specific dictionary pages explains the most opaque passages in Tina Darragh's poetry (as well as correcting previous close readings

and even the author's own accounts of her compositional process), and they show how Darragh, like Clark Coolidge, treats the dictionary as a three-dimensional, sculptural object. Finally, the dictionaries employed by Harryette Mullen ground what might appear to be her most abstract wordplay in referential, precisely denoted, and culturally charged terms while at the same time revealing the racial identities of her sources to be far more complicated and mixed than has been previously assumed.

Later in this Introduction I will suggest why writers with a certain poetics would be drawn to the dictionary in the first place, but for now I want to note that while the narrow focus here is limited to this single compositional practice—just one of the remarkable ways in which the avant-garde has sometimes written—I undertake the project with the larger goal of an expanded, experimental critical methodology in mind. My hope is that this study will suggest alternative routes for scholarly research that will similarly trace some of the other techniques proved by an avant-garde literary tradition that is now well over a century old. In the process, we might discover commensurate *reading* techniques, along with new critical vocabularies, a wider repertoire of analytic approaches, and a more flexible set of methodologies appropriate to the abstraction that radically transformed literature—even if that transformation has not become the familiar narrative for literary studies. Writers have had a long head start on handling language in new ways; it might be time for readers to start to try to catch up.

As a first step toward closing that gap, my readings here situate themselves at an oblique angle to the "surface" and "distant" readings recently christened by literary critics. With a clever substitution, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading" abjures a revelatory reading in order to reveal the surface that has been hidden by prevailing "symptomatic" reading practices; the veiling surface has become, for them, paradoxically the very thing veiled.[18] My project here performs a similar sleight-of-hand when read against traditional hermeneutical methods. To be sure, I am indeed demonstrating things that the poems under consideration do not readily give up (patterns of signification, encrypted referents, the deformations of otherwise unseen and unmentioned signs, and so forth); such structures and relationships are in fact "not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible" from the perspective of conventional reading.[19] But rather than divulge the political ideologies or psychological repressions sought by symptomatic readings, through their various symbolisms and decodings, my readings here disclose certain structures inherent in the material surfaces of a text but illuminated only by means of another (dictionary) text. Instead of latent meanings demystified by

Marxist or psychoanalytic readings, my readings reveal the networks of signifiers laced across the surface of texts themselves and bearing the imprint of their origins: printed objects in particular typographic arrays, words within page spaces, and the three-dimensional volume of (bound) volumes. In place of symbols, the dictionary poetics here articulates a set of material surfaces, mapping metonymies rather than summoning metaphors. The chapters that follow distill a reading practice more concerned with exhaustive description than aesthetic evaluation. More focused on the linguistic rather than the literary (in Paul de Man's terms), this methodology is more inclined to the indexical—gestures of pointing out—than to rhetorical argument, and it is unashamed to be satisfied with the literal rather than reaching for the figural.[20] Above all, it everywhere traces inscriptions rather than representations.

In its radical formalism, which presumes that literary texts are not autonomously separate spheres but that they nonetheless are capable of generating the theoretical, political, and critical structures necessary for their own apprehension, the present book offers a version of the practice of "critical description" that intrigues Best and Marcus. In such a practice, "the purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself."[21] Assuming that "texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves," such readings undertake a patient, open, articulation of networks of signifiers dispersed across a space in which "depth is continuous with surface and is thus an effect of immanence."[22]

Or, to put this another way: Models of depth and presence generate the "pairs of oppositions: present/absent, manifest/latent, and surface/depth" that animate symptomatic readings, which imagine a truer meaning disguised or obscured by a deceptive or false or unreliable surface.[23] In my work here, in contrast, the text is imagined to be more like Roland Barthes's conception of the literary work, wherein "l'espace de l'écriture est à parcourir, il n'est pas à percer [the space of writing is to be traversed, not pierced]."[24] That textual surface requires analysis in order to reveal modes of signification that are not repressed or dissembled, but simply dispersed. The lateral extent is broad enough that patterns and structures—even though they remain unhidden and plainly on the surface—are nonetheless difficult to discern without comparison to a source text, or a view of signifiers unclouded by the semantic referents beneath their own inky surfaces, or an aggregation of terms from across a grammatical, discursive, or narrative expanse.

In that aggregation my project shares a certain procedure with the "distant reading" that has evolved from "a patchwork of other people's re-

search, without a single direct textual reading," as Franco Moretti boasted, into the visualization of networks discernable after the computational analysis of relatively large quantitative data sets—often entire corpora.[25] Although the present study draws its elements from the widest horizons of the text, including its intertexts, it certainly does not abandon "direct textual reading" and its readings are very close, microanalyses of the elements it aggregates from across the traditional boundaries of semantic and rhetorical divisions (sentences, stanzas, cantos, even one book from another). The nature of the intertexts here, moreover, establishes the distance between *Dictionary Poetics* and traditional source studies. Again, the difference hinges on the degree of literalism and materiality. Rather than seek allusions, ideational borrowings, or the genesis of an author's thoughts, the texts I read in tandem demonstrate the collage of language from its particular materialization in printed books and the affordances and constraints of the typographic page. Instead of a general, abstract, discursive cultural atmosphere, these intertexts carry the bibliographic precision of language fixed in print. In her discussion of the intertexts of Lautréamont's *Poésies II*, Julia Kristeva recognizes the need for precisely such textual specificity in an accounting of sources: "il serait nécessaire d'établir quelles éditions de Pascal, de Vauvenargues, de la Rochefoucauld, Ducasse a pu utiliser [it would be necessary to determine which particular editions of Pascal, Vauvenargues, and Rochefoucauld Ducasse had put to use]."[26]

Kristeva's theorization of the relation among texts, in fact, may offer the best precedent for my own approach. Proposing a literary semiotics that would "trouver les formalismes correspondant aux différents modes de jonction des mots (des séquences) dans l'espace dialogique du textes [find the corresponding formal structures between different modes of articulating words (or sequences) in the dialogic space between texts]," Kristeva understands writing as a kind of reading: "le texte littéraire s'insère dans l'ensemble des textes: il est une écriture-réplique (fonction ou négation) d'une autre (des autres) texte(s) [the literary text inserts itself into the set of texts; it is a carbon-copy writing of another (of other) text(s)]."[27] Despite her recognition of the importance of specific editions and the real, bodily materiality of texts, Kristeva is theorizing a mathematically abstract set-theory model of cultural interlocution, and she argues, echoing Roland Barthes, that "tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte [all text is constructed as a mosaic of citations, all text is absorption and transformation of another text]."[28] The cases here, however idiosyncratic and anomalous, are thus strikingly literal versions of more

general literary processes. But there is a middle ground as well; in their dynamic "manière d'écrire en lisant [mode of writing by reading]," the authors I consider foreground what is one of the most remarkable developments in poetry over the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and I hope that my analyses will provide one model of how a critical engagement of other literary works "written by reading" might proceed.[29]

With even a cursory consideration, the dictionary suggests a number of different approaches and genres, and I want to begin by demarcating some of the ground the present study will *not* attempt to cover in any depth. To begin with, I am not here considering works with a surface style modeled on the layout of the dictionary, or troping its formal conventions in a superficial way. Exemplifications of the genre include Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*; Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées recues* (plus its update by Jennifer Moxley and Steve Evans as their own *Dictionary of Received Ideas*); and Georges Bataille's *Dictionnaire critique*.[30] More recently, Lohren Green's *Poetical Dictionary: Abridged* reworks dictionary entries with an ear toward aestheticizing their language and blurring the transitions between distinct denotations.

In his introduction, Green laments the lack of vividness to the words defined in conventional reference books, with their clinical air of dispassionate information science.[31] In contrast, however, he rhapsodizes that "sometimes in the traditional dictionary the page falls away" in the way that a vivid painting creates an illusion that renders the canvas invisible.[32] Echoing the sentiment, Victor Contoski's "Dictionary Poem" figures the dictionary as a vampire sucking the blood from poetry books.[33] In the chapters that follow, we will encounter the exact opposite: poems made vital by the dictionary because writers have tried to break the illusion of the dictionary's detached disinterest and expose the rough weave of the canvas beneath. Seeing the reference book as both microscope and symptom, an artifact that simultaneously brings to light aspects of a culture that it also itself expresses, one literary interrogation of the dictionary would endeavors to make it confess to the prejudices and partisan positions in which it is inevitably implicated and which its impersonal, apodictic style belies. Such literature isolates or foregrounds aspects of a reference work in order to lay bare the ideologies inherent in even the most ostensibly objective and documentary collections. Despite the best efforts of editors, the anonymous, aggregated, collective cultural voice speaks more than it intends.

Solmaz Sharif's 2016 collection *Look*, for instance, turns euphemisms for violence into sexual innuendo by juxtaposing terms from a Defense

Department dictionary of military jargon that collects unclassified terms that are neither service-specific nor have entered into common, nonmilitary usage.[34] In both its typography and intentions, *Look* looks back two decades to Rosmarie Waldrop's *A Key Into the Language of America*, which "involves deletion or substitution" of textually "key details" from the eponymous Roger Williams treatise.[35] Published in 1643, Williams's ethnography was subtitled *An Help to the Language of the Natives in That Part of America Called New-England*, and it became the first systematic vocabulary, or dictionary, of Narragansett, the now extinct dialect of Algonquin once spoken in the region that roughly corresponds to present-day Rhode Island. Waldrop's *Key* emphasizes the social valences of Williams's English definitions, reminding readers that language instruction, and the dictionaries in its service, are always implicated in larger cultural enterprises—in this case, interactions between indigenous communities and Europeans that included not only commercial trade but also contemporaneous armed conflicts all up the Eastern Seaboard, with major wars involving the Powhatan, Pequot, Lenape, and Iroquois and including all the other conflicts that would culminate in King Philip's War.

Language, and language instruction, as tools of imperial force in concert with military and police action are the implicit theme of Angelo V. Suárez's *Philippine English: A Novel*, a dictionary-based book with a political focus similar to *Look*, but with a more ambitious formal experimentation. Composed by extracting the usage example from a Philippine-English dictionary (not, one should note, a Filipino–English dictionary), Suárez allows the illustrative phrases and sentences to suggest the narratives inherent in their sequence.[36] The novel retains the chapter structure of the dictionary's alphabetic form, and it records all of the phrases in the order in which they occur in the original reference book.[37] As with most paratactic collages, general themes and registers recur just often enough to permit semantic connections. In the following excerpt, for example, the body (in terms of its labors, liquids, infirmities, and consumptions), written texts, governmental officials, and automobiles lace a tenuous consistency:

> She writes poetry. Poetry in motion.
> The needle's point. Boiling point. This is the point of the story. On the point of deciding. To point a gun. To point north.
> She poked the spider with a stick to see if it was still alive. He poked the letter under the door. He poked his head around the corner and offered us a cup of tea.

A flag pole.
What is their foreign policy? It's a good policy to save.
Shoe polish. He sings with polish. Let's polish off those cakes.
It's not polite to reach across people at the table. Even though she was very angry, she tried to remain polite.
He hates the politics of his job.
The heavy traffic pollutes the air.
To ponder the question.
A pool of blood.
The car pool. To pool our resources.
A poor student. He's in poor health. Her exam results were very poor. You poor thing, it must be really painful.
I'll pop in and visit him. Pop the books on my desk.
Pop group.
A popular school captain. Popular music.
The students pored over their books.
Sweat comes out through your pores.
A railway porter.
The premier gave her the education portfolio.
A portrait of life in the Middle Ages.
In the book, she was portrayed as a rather weak character.
To pose as a policeman. The virus can pose a serious danger to the elderly.
A posh car.[38]

Cakes follow tea, naturally, and the haste of polishing them off prefigures reaching "across people at the table." Similarly, a "car pool" makes sense in a city where "heavy traffic pollutes the air"—perhaps caused by those "posh cars" driven by commuters who could have taken the "railway" instead. The porter on that railway provides a model of physical labor that might cause one to sweat with the exertion, against which the effort of the student's anxious labor might be measured. But then again, on second reading, that sweat might instead be symptomatic of a fever, and the poor exam might refer to a medical examination rather than the testing of the school students, as when later sentences narrate: "This poem is a specimen of my work. The doctor took a specimen of my blood for tests" and "I attribute my bad marks to being sick on the day of the test."[39] Another pairing again brings the two themes together: "An oral test in French. Oral hygiene."[40] Something here, in any event, is viral, painful, and involves needles and a pool of blood that echoes the "car *pool*." Though perhaps instead of phlebotomy that blood follows from poking the spi-

der, or from shooting the pointed gun. Even more tenuous possibilities could lead the reader to ask whether the "rather weak character" is the woman to whom the portfolio is given, and whether it contains "a portrait of life in the Middle Ages" or if that portrait is instead the topic of one of the books popped on the desk, or pored over by students, and so on. Answers, of course, are not forthcoming, but to "ponder the question" is "the point of the story."

Indeed, when pondered, the themes—aggregated cumulatively across the entire book—turn out to be less innocent and unrelated than they at first appear. The educational motif evident in the cited passage thoroughly pervades the text. On the one hand, this theme reflects the secondary-school audience of the novel's source: the *Anvil-Macquarie Dictionary of Philippine English for High School*.[41] Suárez's book is thus metapedagogical: instructive about the instructional textbook that is its origin. On the other hand, however, the classroom emerges alongside other recurrent motifs: traffic and automobile accidents; physical violence; crime and punishment: thievery, police, the judiciary, prison. These topics are examples of what Caleb Beckwith has termed "politicized micronarratives running throughout the entire 'novel.'"[42] Removed from their dispersed locations in the dictionary, the sample sentences reveal a larger preoccupation when compiled and concentrated: the "appareils d'état [state apparatuses]" of a "société de contrôle [control society]" explicated by theorists such as Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze (following a lead from William S. Burroughs).[43] The military presence of the United States in the Philippines dates to the declaration of military rule in 1898, with control passing from Spain with the Treaty of Paris, and has persisted even after the Second World War in varying guises. English has thus followed on the bootheels of a foreign army, and the significance of a dictionary of "Philippine English" is inflected accordingly. In tandem with the institutions of more overt bodily regulation and discipline frequently mentioned in the dictionary's example sentences, such as the army and police, *English for High School*—and the classrooms in which it was deployed—played its part in the political regime that included "public education in the Philippines, used by America to spread English as the language of bureaucratic colonialism."[44] "Schools hope their discipline will make us good citizens," as the *Anvil-Macquarie* succinctly states the aim.[45] Like Williams's *Key into the Language of America*, Maria Lourdes Bautista and Susan Butler's dictionary of Philippine English played an equivocal role, both promoting and rebuking the colonizing with which it was engaged.[46]

If reference "books are a tool for gaining knowledge," they are also a tool in the orchestrated scenes of classroom discipline and regimentation

described again and again by the example sentences in the *Anvil-Macquarie*.[47] Moreover, with sentences involving law enforcement and criminal justice as ubiquitous as those involving pedagogy, the schoolroom discipline takes place against a background of pervasive physical violence and repressive force, as civic bodies are disciplined with threats and punishments ranging from the corporal to the capital. When encountered individually, on their own, the example sentences may seem to be innocuous, incidental, and randomly invented illustrations of grammar and usage. One at a time they seem focused on the word being defined. When brought together in Suárez's novel, however, their message is abundantly clear; the micronarratives of law enforcement and classroom conduct offer advice to the dictionary's student users: "work according to the rules."[48] The three examples of "institute," for just one example, are telling: "To institute a new government department. To institute rules of conduct. A literary institute."[49] Equally regulated and physically dangerous—because they are so accident-prone—automobiles constitute another key motif in the dictionary's illustrative sentences. Ironically, the recurrent accidents point to a theme that does not occur by accident, and Suárez reveals the theme of out-of-control cars even though the dictionary's language is out of his control. The motif, moreover, dovetails with the theme of criminal justice because the automobiles in the *Anvil-Macquarie* are also the frequent objects of theft. Indeed, based on the preponderance of evidence in these sentences, larceny would seem to be the specific crime so often mentioned by the dictionary's sample phrases, which recount everything from petty embezzlement to organized gangs to freebooters: "the bloodthirsty pirates took no prisoners," and "the pirates shared their booty of gold."[50]

With that framing of theft as piracy, the significance of this motif for Suárez's project becomes clear. Within the *Philippine English* dictionary the theme fits with the other micronarratives about criminal justice, but when transcribed in Suárez's novel it aligns the new work with the poetics of appropriation at the heart of Conceptual Writing and turns it into "a story about pirates."[51] Books, in the *Anvil-Macquarie*, are associated with private property and theft: "the book belongs to him"; "this book is my property" "somebody took my book." The dictionary implies one ethos with the sentence "the poems are printed by courtesy of the author"; Suárez implies another when his preface confesses that the phrases were "lifted directly."[52] Several pairings, accordingly, signify anew in their appropriated context: "She committed the poem to memory. He committed a crime"; "An accurate copy. An accurate account of the accident"; "I've requested a copy of the book but haven't received it. To copy a painting."

Additionally, books are figured as substrates for new writing: "abuse of library books by scribbling in them"; "to autograph a book"; "to censor a book." Indeed, the dictionary's sentences sometimes seem to carry the seeds of their future literary fate; they mention "a novel idea" and often figure books as something to be abridged and reiterated, as Suárez's novel has in fact done: "I read an extract from his latest book"; "this book is a condensation of a much larger novel"; "this novel is just a variation of all his other books"; "the story for the film was adapted from a French novel" (elsewhere discriminating "the film version of the book"); "I originally wrote six pages but I condensed it into three"; "He condensed his story into just a few pages" and into "another book" altogether.

Philippine English: A Novel, thus follows a literary tradition of reframing appropriated texts in order to lay bare some aspect of their language, thereby critiquing their implicit presuppositions. In the same vein, Felipe Cussen's *Letras* also takes the dictionary as a source to be appropriated according to predetermined rules, with an absolute minimum of authorial intervention, ascertaining a number of cultural symptoms in the process. *Letras* presents itself as an abecedary, compiling all of the definitions of each letter or digraph in the various editions of the official dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy. First published in 1780 as *Diccionario de la lengua castellana reducido a un tomo para su más fácil uso, ya sin las citas de los autores* [*Dictionary of the Castellan Language Condensed in a Single Volume for Ease of Use and Without the Authors' Citations*], the academic *Diccionario* saw two revisions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries before realizing its most recent iteration in 2001.[53] Along the way, even the simplest guides to pronouncing individual letters became fraught with cultural and colonial politics, as the entries reveal various shibboleths of regional distinction. Galicia, for instance, retains the antiquated soft pronunciation of the *x*, while in the Canary Islands one hears a *seseo*, or the "indistinción fonológica respecto de la s [phonological lack of differentiation with respect to the *s*]" when *z* "se articula como una s en que la lengua adopta posición convexa, generalmente predorsal, con salida dental o dentoalveolar del aire [is pronounced like an *s*, in that the tongue adopts a convex, generally predorsal position, with a dental or alveolar-dental expulsion of air]."[54] By interpolating the entries from each edition, moreover, certain changes can be tracked over time, as when the aspiration of the *h*, for instance, spreads from "de algunas zonas" (some regions) to "de numerosas zonas" (numerous regions) of the "americanas y en determinadas voces de origen extranjero" (the Americas and in certain accents of foreign origin).[55] In Andalucía and Extremadura, its vehemence before a vowel gives it the force of an *x* or

j—though not the *x* used in Mexican Spanish, as a later entry qualifies, or the archaic voiceless palatal fricative preserved in Asturian and the distinctly Chilean pronunciation before certain vowels.[56]

Other traces of geopolitical history could be teased from Cussen's magnification of what may be the least read sections of the dictionary, but his focus on the individual units of articulated Spanish speech suggest that we might also read *Letras* in relation to sound poetry and in particular with respect to the sonic explorations of Christian Bök's *Eunoia*. Where *Letras* is structured so that it devotes a separate section to each phoneme, *Eunoia* devotes each of its chapters to a single English vowel. The work is a serial lipogram, in which chapters are permitted to contain only univocalic words sharing the same single vowel (that is, the only vowel allowed in the first chapter is *a*, the only vowel that appears in the second chapter is *e*, and so on); the book thus corrals the variety of sounds represented by each grapheme, rather than a monotonous repetition of a single sound. Like Suárez and Cussen, Bök's project exhibits the exhaustive, comprehensive impulse of Conceptual Writing by seeking to use all of the univocalics in English.[57] Moreover, Bök sets a precedent for turning to the dictionary as a source for his textual mining; its vocabulary is drawn from combing through the three volumes of the 1976 edition of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*. Although Bök confines his search to this one particular reference book, the point is not to exploit its idiosyncrasies or reveal its biases but rather to appeal to the comprehensive neutrality of its voluminous compass and the inclusiveness of its three thousand "unabridged" pages. As with the OuLiPo (which I discuss in Chapter 6), whose members also turned habitually to the dictionary as a source for their textual permutations and algorithmic poetics, the lexicographic imagination behind *Eunoia* takes the dictionary to represent the dream of a complete compendium of language—or at least a dataset large enough to yield a sense of representative and impersonal lexical samples.

One can sense the same hope in Marcel Duchamp's instructions to "prendre un dict. Larousse et copier tous les mots dits 'abstraits,' càd. qui n'aient pas de référence concrète [take a Larousse dictionary and copy all the 'abstract' words, that is to say, those which do not have concrete referents]."[58] Elsewhere, Duchamp proposes using the dictionary for a sort of secular *sortes biblicae*, though one in which the answer is always known in advance. The dictionary, in this imagined ideality, exhibits such a dispersed uniformity that Duchamp can propose a linguistic theory as a mathematical theorem: "10 mots trouvés en ouvrant au hasard le dictionnaire [10 words found by opening the dictionary at random]" by one per-

son and ten selected through the same method by another person "ont la même différence de 'personnalité' que si les 10 mots été écrits par . . . intention [have the same difference in 'personality' as if they had been written with intentionality]."[59] Chapter 4 will look in more detail at a performed dissolution of the dictionary, but here the sense is that the vast scope of the dictionary—a lexical ocean in which literary style has been dissolved—effects the disappearance of unique, differentiable character; the note continues: "ou bien, peu importe, il y aurait des cas où cette 'personnalité' peut disparaître [or else, same difference, it would be the case where that 'personality' can disappear]."[60]

However impersonal the flat, scientific tone of most dictionaries may be, an interest in the dictionary, in contrast, might itself reveal a distinctive personal tic; a number of the notes for Duchamp's *Grand verre*, as it happens, make recourse of the dictionary as a source for artistic production. One proposes: "parcourir un dictionnaire et raturer tous les mots 'indésirables.' Peut-être en rajouter quelques-uns. Quelquefois remplaces les mots raturés par un autre [go through a dictionary and cross out all the 'undesirable' words. Perhaps add a few. Replace some of the scratched-out words with others]."[61] Another directs: "acheter un dictionnaire et barrer les mots à barrer. Signer: revu et corrigé [buy a dictionary and cancel the words to be cancelled. Sign it: reviewed and corrected]."[62] During visits from Duchamp, as his friend Denise Browne Hare recalls, "there was a lot of looking up words in the dictionary. I had an old, classic Larousse, and at some point Marcel would nearly always get it out. He loved the format, the little illustrations on every page."[63]

Working from a book that was published, perhaps not coincidentally, in the year of Duchamp's first readymades—a 1913 *Webster's Secondary School Edition Dictionary*—Doris Cross began overpainting its own readymade pages just as Duchamp was enjoying his seminal retrospective.[64] Her "Dictionary Column" works begin with the idea of the dictionary's inclusive dream: "everything is here," she opines, "it is only to be seen and found. We are surrounded with everything."[65] But her practice recognizes the contingent, material, specific reality of that immersive ideal: "I am not involved with design," she protests, "I am just involved with the idea of leaving things—in this case, words, where they are found."[66] We will see a number of writers leaving words where they are found on the dictionary page, while variously obscuring their surrounding lexical contexts, but Cross echoes her demurral about design with a later insistence that her work with words was not literary: "I'm making connections, not writing poetry," she remonstrated.[67] Depending on one's definition of "poetry," the opposition is not self-evident, but perhaps the connections Cross