

Poetry in Motion

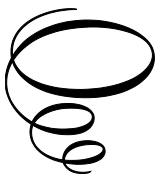
Poetry in Motion:

*Comparing Materials and
Media of Early Modern
Short Literature*

By

Jameson Kismet Bell

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2026

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-6242-0

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-6243-7

for Mira

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Books are material objects that take a lot of hands to create. This book arose from several undergraduate and graduate courses on short literature taught in the Department of Western Languages and Literatures at Boğaziçi University, in Istanbul, Türkiye. Students learned, compared, and eventually taught me through examples of dozens of short genres. Of the many anecdotes, aphorisms, emblems, epigrams, essays, fables, graffiti, idioms, incantations, jokes, lyric poems, posters, mottos, proverbs, puns, riddles, and tattoos we studied, only a few made it into this book. Student participation, feedback, and daring experiments with criticism have been vital to this book's success. While literature departments are continually under threat from within and outside the university, I thank all students who weathered natural, political, and institutional tempests, increases in class size, online virtual spaces during Covid-19, and close reading and attendance requirements.

Current and former colleagues have also given much-needed encouragement and feedback. First, special thanks to my departmental colleagues at Boğaziçi University: Burcu Akkoyun, Alyin Alkaç, Naz Bulamur, Başak Demirhan, Emine Fişek, Kim Fortuny, Özlem Görey, Ethan Guagliardo, Matthew Gumpert, Melih Levi, Cevza Sevgen, Hande Tekdemir, Aslı Tekinay, Özlem Oğüt Yazıcıoğlu, and Cihan Yurdaün. Interdisciplinary work is also fundamental to this book, which means special thanks to colleagues from the Critical and Cultural Studies MA program, especially the moral, organizational, and personal support from Didar Akar, Benoit Ellerbach, Işıl Erduyan, Ahmet Ersoy, and Saygun Gökarısel.

Though work on this book was in short bursts between other duties, thank you to various institutions for allowing me space and time to research and share early stages of this project. Thanks to The Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame and The Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois, for time and space and access to their archives. Organizations create conferences and workshops for the purpose of sharing research: thank you to the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts; the Klein Formen (Small Forms) Graduate Institute at Humboldt University, Berlin, for extra time to walk the city; the Electronic Literature

Association; the Renaissance Studies Association; and the German Studies Association.

This work was also made possible in part through financial support from the Boğaziçi University Research Fund, “Literature is Everywhere: A Comparative Field Guide to Urban Literary Landscapes in Three Cities: Istanbul, Chicago, Berlin (2023–2026)” (BAP 19798/23BP9).

The Introduction to this book was originally published open access as “From the Library to the Lab: Close Reading Rabbits as a Cross-Disciplinary Experiment,” in *Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur*. 2019 (41), 1-17, DOI: 10.26650/sdsl2019-0014 (CC BY-NC 4.0). It is reprinted here in modified form. Thank you to Istanbul University Press for permission to reuse it. Chapter Two of this book was originally published open access as “‘A Dog’s Revenge’: Comparative Viability of an Early Modern Verbal, Pictorial, and Dramatic Proverb” in *Kare: International Journal of Comparative Literature*. 17 (June 2024): 45–58, <https://doi.org/10.38060/kare.1461888>, (CC BY-ND 4.0). Except for editing and formatting, it is reprinted here in its original form. Thank you to *Kare* for permission to reuse it.

Finally, thank you to my daughter Mira, parents Wishart and Mary, and sister Emily. Your love and support made this book possible.

INTRODUCTION

COMPARATIVE CLOSE READINGS OF MOBILE INSCRIPTIONS

Lab Technician.
ACGT.
Poem.
Rabbit.
GFP Protein.

This incomplete list comprises a category of objects and actors that can be read “closely.” Depending on one’s discipline, one may recognize the terms above, and the concept of “close reading” may signify either a lot or very little. Lists like the one above also invite comparison, both inside and outside the frame of the list. For literary critics, close reading is a particular practice from the early and mid-twentieth century that developed from a habit of paying *more* attention to the words of the work, focusing *longer* on the words of a work, and moving *beyond* a commonsense understanding to a *deeper* meaning of the words of a work. Close reading is a collection of modifiers to designate a special practice whereby author-created words are used to create more author-created words. By “author-created,” I mean a work that is distinctive and intentional, rather than words that are off-the-cuff or commonplace.

Outside literature departments, close reading may signify nothing at all because the concepts and practices do not go by that name. This does not mean there is no close reading outside literary criticism. Except for the word “poem,” not much on the list is traditionally “literary.” A lab technician, GFP protein, rabbit, and amino acids *ACGT* that make up DNA sequences would not be traditional objects for literary critics to read closely. Even finding a point of comparison might be difficult. Yet as the list above reveals and as this book will show in due time, vibrant discourses in the history of science, media studies, and sociology use similar modifiers when engaging with their objects of study. This introduction aims to help literary critics become familiar with these

concepts, which often overlap with close reading and comparison. As material objects, “literature” is continually in motion.

In order to reach this goal, I imagine the audience of this book to be literary and/or cultural critics, though others outside of these disciplines might be interested in the discussion of various forms of short literature and close reading. I attempt to situate close reading and comparison in a cross-disciplinary conversation that points beyond literary criticism and linguistic analysis. My interest in non-literary forms of close reading and comparison developed during the writing of my previous book,¹ which used techniques of close reading from literary criticism to analyze and compare what would not traditionally have been considered “literary objects.” In that book, I read and compared visual and verbal representations of the brain in early sixteenth-century medical and surgical books to reveal an object that was unknown in historical discourses.

Conversely, this book will attempt to bring practices of *microprocessing*, *pragmatology*, *media archaeology*, and *rhythm analysis* to fuzzy concepts like *immutable mobiles*, *boundary objects*, and *rhythm* as they apply to literary criticism. I apply these methods to short literary genres like the emblem, the essay, the proverb, the aphorism, and the poem that were not stable objects in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition, as collecting practices increased in the Early Modern Period, collections and anthologies became the primary mode of storing short genres. A comparative approach not only to specific short genres but also to the practice of close reading will, I hope, add substance—material objects and practices—to literary criticism, which often focuses on formulaic pairs of language and meaning rather than experimenting with the objects themselves. In the next section of this introduction, I offer an example of Francis Bacon’s rabbits that shows both the experimental nature of writing and reading and also a type of close reading that follows the coming-into-being of material objects. This is followed by a brief history of close reading that reveals places where expertise from other disciplines can supplement well-known approaches common in literary studies.

The introduction then concludes with examples of the problem of close reading rabbits, a practice I argue is specific to the material, requiring attention to space and time. This example offers a means through which literary critics can apply the previously mentioned social and scientific concepts to literary works. My choice of representations of rabbits as an example of a comparative technique of close reading is both

¹ Jameson Kismet Bell, *Performing the Sixteenth-Century Brain: Beyond Word and Image Inscriptions* (LIT Verlag, 2018).

arbitrary and intentional: it is arbitrary because, if microprocessing, pragmatology, media archaeology, and rhythmanalysis are useful techniques for literary critics, one could apply them to the material of any literary representation. Rabbits, chairs, dogs, and telephone poles would each allow for critics to engage the material of representations rather than just the representation itself. Rabbits are also intentional because of the thousands of years of domestication.² Most cultures are familiar with rabbits as pets, food, material for clothing, laboratory animals, and as literary and cinematic representations. If we cannot close-read rabbits, we cannot close-read anything. In later chapters, I apply these techniques of close reading and comparative analysis to the materials of emblems, aphorisms, proverbs, dramatic works, and anthologies.

Francis Bacon's Rabbits

In 1625, Francis Bacon published an expanded version of his *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, originally published as a collection of ten essays in 1597. By 1625, it had lengthened to fifty-eight. While he believed the Latin version was the most authoritative—a “universal language” that would “last as long as books last”—it was the popularity of the English version that met the needs of a growing reading public. The Latin version appeared posthumously in 1638.³ Mr. Spedding—a nineteenth-century translator and editor of Bacon's works—described his surprise that a book of essays containing only “solid observations, packed as close as possible and stripped of all ornament” was printed multiple times in the early seventeenth century. It was a “credit to the reading public of those days.”⁴ Bacon's thirty-third essay, “Of Plantations,” which Bacon describes as an “ancient, primitive, and heroical work,” offers a minor yet important point of comparison between the Latin and English versions.⁵

While essays are not aphorisms, Spedding's use of Bacon's definition of an aphorism to describe these shorter writings is telling, not only of Bacon's influence on writing and reading in the seventeenth century, but also of reading expectations that developed after Bacon's time. Friedrich Kittler undoubtedly writes of a German context, yet some

² Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 86.

³ Francis Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral* (William Rawley, 1625), 373.

⁴ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 535.

⁵ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 457.

of his observations are also relevant to an English one. In quoting nineteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder about the history of language, Kittler notes that in oral cultures, the “living context of language is accompanied by so many other phenomena, they are moving and sufficient themselves.”⁶ Spedding was writing about Bacon and his readers from a nineteenth-century point of view, where an isolated, mechanically driven representation of language became “severed from everything else, torn away, deprived of their life, they are, to be sure, no more than ciphers.”⁷ Thus, Spedding was surprised that such a large audience of “modern readers” existed in 1625.

In the essay “Of Plantations,” Bacon represents human and animal bodies in terms of what Kittler describes as happening to sounds and inscriptions: severing, tearing away, depriving of life, and ciphering. Described as a “heroic work,” the “planting” of new offshoots of intrepid civilizations is compared to the now-forgotten gardening and husbandry metaphors that also appeared in his other essays. Bodies from one location are moved to another so that “new plantations [are] to be the children of former kingdoms.”⁸ In order to establish good roots for these new plants, Bacon argued against sending the “scum of people, wicked condemned men” who will only “spoilth the plantation, live like rogues, not fall to work, be lazy, do mischief, spend victuals, be quickly weary, and then certify over to their country to the discredit of the plantation.”⁹ Isenberg has recently shown that the practice of sending criminals as “plants” to new colonies actually expanded throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ The mythical failure of colonies like Roanoke, Virginia, in 1587 and the heroic success narratives of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1605 appear to have prompted Bacon to write this essay and include it in the 1625 edition.

Besides these tales, Bacon and a group of nobles applied for and received a land patent in 1610 for territory on Labrador Island, Newfoundland,

⁶ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer (Stanford University Press, 1990), 43.

⁷ Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, 43; Johann Gottfried Herder, “On the Origin of Language,” in *Two Essays by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Gottfried Herder*, trans. John Moran and Alexander Gode (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), 116.

⁸ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 457.

⁹ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 457.

¹⁰ Nicole Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (Penguin, 2016), 13.

Canada.¹¹ This was over a hundred years after Britain had planted a flag there in 1497, when it was called “Codfishland.”¹² Throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, “disorder held sway” between the new planters, eager seasonal fishermen, and the island’s local inhabitants. Many court cases regarding the rightful rulers of the island continued until a final decision was made in 1907 and published in twelve volumes in 1927.¹³ Bacon’s essay, in this context, is less about a general definition of “plantations” than a guide for the governance of his own plantation.

The essay genre, like the plantation, requires forethought, proper ordering, and then reordering based on a reading sequence. The essay and the new land are both decoded through exploration and encoded with inscribed material. These materials become ciphers of a severed language, where the old location is torn away and the “plants” are deprived of their old life or the “living context of language.” Each “plant,” imagined in a new context, was carefully selected for the projected sequence of fresh growth. Bacon argued that Britain should initially send workers who were fit for wilderness—seeds that grow “speedily” and not yet present in the new place—and beasts that were “least subject to disease and multiply fastest.”¹⁴ As the plantation establishes itself, the very “plants” themselves change when the plantation “be of strength.” The essay sequences the representation of these plants in discrete verbal units as the imagined plantation grows. For example, toward the end of the essay, he writes, “When the plantation grows to strength, then it is time to plant with women as well as with men; that the plantation may spread into generations.”¹⁵ However, while the essay ends when the topic is complete, the well-wrought plantation can grow well into the future.

¹¹ Charles Russell and Co., *In the Privy Council. In the Matter of the Boundary between the Dominion of Canada and the Colony of Newfoundland in the Labrador Peninsula, between the Dominion of Canada of the One Part and the Colony of Newfoundland of the Other Part* (The Privy Council, 1927), 4:1670, Canada.

¹² Russell and Co., *In the Privy Council. In the Matter of the Boundary between the Dominion of Canada and the Colony of Newfoundland in the Labrador Peninsula, between the Dominion of Canada of the One Part and the Colony of Newfoundland of the Other Part*, 4:1668.

¹³ Russell and Co., *In the Privy Council. In the Matter of the Boundary between the Dominion of Canada and the Colony of Newfoundland in the Labrador Peninsula, between the Dominion of Canada of the One Part and the Colony of Newfoundland of the Other Part*, 4:1.

¹⁴ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 457–58.

¹⁵ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 459.

Between the English version in 1625 and the authoritative-yet-posthumous Latin version of 1638, rabbits (*cuniculi*) were added in the section on “beasts” as a type of animal that multiplies fast and is least subject to disease. It is this inclusion that offers a problem for close reading in a literary context, especially when searching for meaning. Bacon incorrectly assumed vernacular languages would fade and no longer turn a profit for himself or printers. He thought Latin editions would spread beyond England to the continent as “the language in which he thought his works would endure.” However, as Dana Sutton remarked, “He backed the wrong horse.”¹⁶

As one can see below, the primary difference in the sentence between the 1625 English edition and the 1638 Latin edition is the inclusion of rabbits (*cuniculi*) as an item beneficial for new plantations:

Pecudes et aves delige eas quae a morbis praecipue immunes sunt et prae caeteris prolificae, quales sunt porci, caprae, galinae, galinae Indicae, anseres, columbae domesticae, **cuniculi**, et similes (1638) (Bold added)

For beasts, or birds, take chiefly such as are least subject to diseases, and multiply fastest; as swine, goats, cocks, hens, turkeys, geese, house-doves, and the like (1625)

Including rabbits in this list is part of a long history of how an animal “becomes a certain type of animal” in social, genetic, and epistemological contexts.¹⁷ The rabbit is not just an element in a list; it is a plant among plants that gives organized colonizers the best chance of success. Bacon selected this plant-rabbit because of its fecundity and disease-resistance. This breeding of animals for certain traits, even in the early seventeenth century, created very different “rabbits” from those that came before or after. Demello and Davis have shown that humans “create” rabbits according to commercial or aesthetic needs that are shaped by stories about rabbits in cultural imaginations.¹⁸ A traditional close reading of this representation of rabbits becomes problematic when contrasted with the changing signified meaning of rabbits and the appearance of “real” rabbits in the newly created plantations in the growing New World.

¹⁶ Francis Bacon, “Introduction,” in *Sir Francis Bacon, Sermones Fideles Sive Interiora Rerum (Printed 1638)*, ed. Dana Sutton (The University of Birmingham, 2024), <https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/essays/>.

¹⁷ DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*, 49.

¹⁸ Margo DeMello and Susan Davis, *Stories Rabbits Tell: A Natural and Cultural History of a Misunderstood Creature* (Lantern Books, 2003).

The next section addresses this problem and offers a potential solution by focusing on the material of the representation and the represented object.

Close Reading Inside and Outside Literary Context

As we temporarily leave Bacon's rabbits and begin this journey into close reading, it is important to pay attention to the goal of this section: a comparison of close reading practices inside and outside university literature departments. By first offering a brief history of close reading from a literary perspective, we can see both its advantages and limitations. Literary close reading often follows four basic historical stages, the fourth of which we find ourselves in now: 1) close reading as exegesis; 2) close reading as moral education; 3) close reading as a special and isolated activity; and 4) close reading beyond the book. This brief history allows us to see that the practices of microprocessing, pragmatology, media archaeology, and rhythmanalysis have their points of contact and divergence, particularly in relation to the objects of study and the methods by which we analyze objects. In addition, in contrast to stable objects, literary works resemble immutable mobiles and boundary objects—fuzzy, mobile, or unbounded ideograms that develop contours over time. To begin, as literary critics, we must first ask ourselves two important questions: what is close reading and what are the objects of inquiry for this methodology? Insufficient answers to these questions will lead to a need for other methods of analysis and objects of study.

Close reading, a contemporary method of reading and interpreting poetry, short stories, and occasionally novels or other "literary" works, began as the ancient practice of interpreting sacred texts. This popular process was known by a different name in the Middle Ages: *exegesis*, the critical interpretation of human language that was thought to conceal divine origins. The practice of paying close attention to religious works as divine and prophetic speech then spread to the creation and interpretation of secular works as well, which continued well into the Early Modern Period. Liberal humanism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries introduced a second stage of close reading that shifted the emphasis away from a divine source of inspiration and the salvation of souls to the moral education of citizens. Authors and critics appeared as geniuses and intellectuals, not divinely inspired media between God and humans.

The third stage appeared in the early twentieth century through the pedagogical methods called "New Criticism," which positioned itself against the moral-secular literary criticism combined with history. The New Critics saw themselves as part of a so-called "modernization" of

literary studies, which meant educating a new type of student. Though there is an enormous gap between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century, we find that in the intervening centuries, close reading had become a secular mode of education outside religious contexts. Ethics began and ended with the education of the individual, who required instruction in a particular style of engaging the world. Close reading, in its early twentieth-century form, reacted against this trend of set answers, moral sentiments, and formulaic perceptions of the world, including literature.

Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom, the best-known literary critics from this period, limited close reading to great works for the sake of the development of the reader and the continuation of the discipline. For both Brooks and Ransom, a poem is action; it is doing something that students and critics must follow, what Brooks called “the meanderings of a good poem.”¹⁹ Close reading encouraged the reader to isolate a work from its historical context and analyze its formal and linguistic features. This practice also implied a critique of the opinions or dogmas the reader brought to a work through stock responses that distorted the meaning(s) of figurative language. Without a critique of the process of reading, the reader could transform the poem into something that it was not.

Besides more rigorous methods, Ransom and Brooks offered limitations on objects of study, excluding some works as not poetic. We see that the selection process deemed some works as undeserving of interpretation, while “good” works became canonical and were repeatedly reinterpreted. Brooks categorized most of the poems he interpreted as part of “the central stream of tradition.”²⁰ For New Critics, if one is to spend a lot of time reading poems closely, they should be great works printed in big, beautiful books.

The fourth stage and its continuation have led to the present moment in literary criticism, spanning the 1960s to the present, where one finds the influences of deconstruction, feminism and gender studies, Marxism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and literary pedagogy.²¹ These cultural domains also expanded what was considered worthy of close reading: the shift in judgment about what merits close reading brought a radical shift in the practice of close reading. Mark Johnson and George Lakoff mark the category of “great literature” as one that is based on the

¹⁹ Cleanth Brooks, “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, ed. Cleanth Brooks (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947), 208.

²⁰ Brooks, “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” 192.

²¹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

belief in separate literal and figurative language forms.²² Poetry and literature arose from rhetorical training and became the domain of “great” writing, which emphasizes a special form of the linguistic code and authors who have mastered it. Great works make the codes of language more special and more unique and thus require specially trained critics to interpret them. However, if this distinction between literal and figurative language forms is artificial—or if all language is figurative—then the objects of study multiply.

What remained unquestioned until recently in the close reading of literary works is the “book” quality of literature. Poems belong in anthologies or books. Short genres and stories are collected in books. Novels and dramas are printed in books. The material of the literary artifact is paper and ink, and the home of these books is the library. When Hayles wrote that we have been “lulled into somnolence by five hundred years of print,” she was attempting to help literary critics “wake up to the importance of media-specific analysis.”²³ Unaware, or at least finding it unimportant, New Critics paid little attention to the material from which talented authors created great literature. The content of literature was the focus of pedagogy and criticism: of course, literature came in books.

In this material–media turn in literary criticism, we may take the following truths for granted. Books are things. Poems are things. Aphorisms are things. Writing or inscribing is an action upon a thing. These literary objects and practices are material in the same way the genome, a tree, a rabbit, or a scientist is material. But these are not stable things. After Barthes²⁴ and Derrida²⁵ shifted the focus away from the author and the individual work, we witness a slow turn to other objects that can be close-read, which has redefined what it means for an object to be literary. Dolphijn and van der Tuin and Hayles, among others, explore the possibilities of “New Materialism,” which has emphasized “materiality-in-change.”²⁶ In the close reading of a material object, both the subject and the object undergo a transformation, a double motion that one is required to address.

²² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1–8.

²³ Katherine Hayles, “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” *Poetics Today* 25, no. 1 (2004): 68.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977).

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²⁶ Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2013), 108; Hayles, “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” 69.

As we will see through a comparison of close reading practices in the next section, artists are as much scientists as scientists are artists. This juxtaposition of science and art follows recent work on the artistic dimensions of scientific practices and the scientific dimensions of artistic practices from Crispin and Gilmore.²⁷ The production and interpretation of a poem follow epistemic paths that are similar to viewing a neuron under a microscope, scribbling a note during a laboratory experiment, or planning a trip to the New World: one makes inscriptions, and inscriptions are products of epistemic activities, the domain of which must be delimited—i.e., the laboratory—to judge the value of the knowledge produced.

It is in this post-structuralist moment where the tension between the linguistic and semiotic codes comes to the fore. Critics are no longer readers in the “New Critical” sense. By adding semiotics, criticism now allows one to read all objects as signs, so the formal and rhetorical techniques of early twentieth-century literary criticism are no longer limited to mainstream literature or great works. In addition to a focus on the communicative value of the linguistic code—through paraphrase, generalization, or translation of one form into another—sign-based close readers focus on the material object as it moves and wavers between the specific and the general, the signifier and the signified, that coalesce into a sign.

In this brief and inadequate history of literary close reading, we see points of contact with sociology and the history of science in the shift away from linguistic codes to semiotic codes. Since the turn of the millennium, Jane Gallop,²⁸ and more recently, Rita Felski,²⁹ have pointed out limitations to the practice of close literary criticism as well as the advantages literary critics can offer through an analysis of literary and non-literary works. Whereas Gallop encouraged close reading to save the discipline of literary criticism from oblivion, Felski’s approach is less forceful: it delimits the boundaries of the influence of critique, where it functions, and where it fails. Felski offers the suggestion that “different methods are needed for the many aims of criticism, and there is no one-size-fits-all form of thinking that can fulfill all these aims simultaneously.”³⁰

²⁷ Bob Gilmore and Darla Crispin, *Artistic Experimentation in Music: An Anthology* (Leuven University Press, 2014).

²⁸ Jane Gallop, “The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters,” *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 16, no. 3 (2000): 7–17.

²⁹ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 7–8.

³⁰ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 17.

Following this statement, there is no singular “close reading” even within literary criticism. The next section of this chapter aims to introduce literary critics to alternate forms of criticism outside the domain of literature—forms that focus specifically on the motion and the materiality of the object of literature. With these points in mind, we can now compare these key elements with non-literary forms of close reading.

Microprocessing, Pragmatology, Media Archaeology, and Rhythmanalysis

The shift away from linguistic codes, or the addition of semiotic codes to interpreting literary works, is particular to literary criticism. Other disciplines did not have to leave language behind to find the sign. They started with the sign. For example, the sociologist Steven Woolgar and a historian of science, Bruno Latour, teamed up to focus on the details of laboratory life—the everyday conversations, equipment, people, and acts of inscribing that are involved in the production of facts. They called their method of analysis a form of *microprocessing* that includes the rational and the irrational that appears when one “closely examine(s) the day-to-day operations of the laboratory—not the grand theories, but the microprocesses on which these theories are based.”³¹ Whether it is a representation of a brain peptide or the notes, gestures, and routines of lab technicians, the practice of paying attention to that which is outside the rationally constructed narrative of the final product reveals the illogical, situated negotiations through which scientists work. Latour proposed we do away with cognitive explanations or interpretations and instead focus on the micro-techniques and inscriptions by and through which knowledge is produced, both on small and large scales.³²

In the same vein as Latour, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, a philosopher and historian of science, sees scientific activity as experimental and historically situated, a perspective that requires a *pragmatology* (*pragmata* a thing, matter; *gonos*- the created), or a type of historical analysis that includes the process of something becoming known which was not yet known at the time.³³ Whether it is a protein in a test tube or correspondences between multinational laboratories, scientists do not

³¹ Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 151.

³² Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Harvard University Press, 1987), 255.

³³ Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 16–17.

know the future. They are in the practice of creating it. However, they have inherited particular technologies, habits, and spaces with and through which they work, which cannot be directly linked with future knowledge or discoveries. Future knowledge appears through *experimentation* with *epistemic objects* within an *experimental system*.

Literary artifacts such as aphorisms, poems, novels, graffiti, or (as we will see) genetic codes, should be treated as *epistemic objects*. In relation to these objects, any form of close reading needs to appear as *experimentation*. What is this *epistemic object* a literary work is supposed to be, and what is experimentation in relation to reading these objects? Rheinberger defines such an object in relation to the discovery or creation of new areas of research and the subsequent replacement of previous systems out of which epistemic things arise: “Most new epistemic things take their shape from old tools.”³⁴ An *epistemic object*, for Rheinberger, is synonymous with Foucault’s *discourse-object*,³⁵ or the embodiment of a concept. It also parallels Star’s and Griesemer’s concept of a *boundary object*, which will be discussed in a moment.³⁶ Epistemic objects are ideograms where the difference between the old and the new arises from the accumulation of an experience, or how humans begin to conceptualize material within a historical network of signification. Until a certain level of experience has been obtained, the new is indecipherable because it cannot be represented.

Knowledge only appears when it is “embedded” within this semiotic text after one becomes familiar with it. Rheinberger states that “the more familiar a scientist is with *his* experimental set-up, the more effectively *its* inherent possibilities open up.”³⁷ Embedded cognition presupposes an accumulated level of cohesion between the material world and the mind thinking about and through the material world—a continuity that blurs, if not obliterates, the divide between the self and the other, the author and the reader, the mind and the brain, or the inside and the outside

³⁴ Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube*, 81.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Sheridan Smith (Routledge, 2002), 139.

³⁶ Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39,” *Social Studies of Science* 19 (1989): 387–420.

³⁷ Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, “Experimental Systems: Difference, Graphematicity, Conjecture,” in *Intellectual Birdhouse: Artistic Practice as Research*, ed. Ute Meta Bauer et al. (König, 2012), 89.

of historical periods.³⁸ Inasmuch as the subject uses the elements of the environment as tools, these same tools shape the cognitive processes of their use. The epistemic object is what appears through this experimental process.

From a diachronic point of view, Latour saw a unique experimental process developing in sixteenth-century Europe that led to an attempt to stabilize the motions of nature through careful attention to inscriptions and record keeping. This mundane activity of taking notes, making maps, images, and diagrams, and the use of paper for diverse purposes created “The Great Divide” between ancient and modern epistemic practices. This fictional rift can be “broken down into many small, unexpected and practical sets of skills to produce images and to read and write about them.”³⁹ His concept of *immutable mobiles*—objects that were sturdy enough to endure yet portable enough to be carried, shared, and used rhetorically—led to a victory of sorts, the creation of “hard facts” that began to dominate “war, politics, law, and I shall now show to science and technology.”⁴⁰ From this point of view, large changes happen cumulatively over time at the smallest level of writing and imagining procedures.

Since the early 2000s, media archaeologists have been active in their explorations of how contemporary materialities are imagined through past media, which echoes Rheinberger’s focus on “old tools” used in new ways. Digital circuitry, film, radio, and various other machines rely heavily on past media’s structural and psychic demands. New media is always introduced into old media structures and their fantasies of the future. Investigating historically situated combinations of material and imagination creates the possibilities (and impossibilities) of how the world is made “real.” Without historical structures, writes Jussi Parikka in his recent book *What is Media Archaeology?*, actual or “real” media is useless.⁴¹ Any medium derives its use value through its imagined technical possibilities and, even more importantly, through its impossibilities and eventual inviability. Foreshadowing media archaeology’s emphasis on the mutability of material objects and our knowledge of them, Star, a sociologist of science, shifted away from Latour’s “immutable mobiles” toward what she called “boundary objects” that are “both plastic enough to

³⁸ Andy Clark and David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” *ANALYSIS* 58, no. 1 (1998): 7–19.

³⁹ Bruno Latour, “Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together,” in *Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, ed. H. Kuklick (JAI Press, 1986), 6:3–5.

⁴⁰ Latour, “Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together,” 3–5.

⁴¹ Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Polity Press, 2012), 1–2.

adapt to local needs and the constraints of several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.”⁴² As an embodied concept, boundary objects are those things that move among diverse groups, becoming more precise among experts and less so in outlying communities. Boundary objects move, meander, and change while at the same time maintaining a level of conceptual stability as they resist absolute standardization.

If a poem is a “meandering movement,” as Brooks claims, then, like all other instruments, it is an embedded tool. How one imagines its functioning is historically situated, requiring the reader to pay attention to the context out of which the object appears. And if a reader follows this meandering movement of a literary object, one is unsure about the state of the object until after one has engaged it. Within an experimental system, an object is undefined at the moment of engagement, and the interaction between reader and object is, by definition, experimental. Any other form of “close reading” would simply recognize and apply formulas, patterns, and familiar codes, or bring the object within the domain of the familiar.

As a final method of close reading—Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis provides a framework that combines laboratory objects, mobile objects, fuzzy objects, and boundary objects with the researcher's engagement with natural and artificial rhythms. Rather than focus on the fiction of “real” objects, Lefebvre's approach to analyzing rhythms appears in his *Elements of Rhythmanalysis: An Introduction to the Understanding of Rhythms* (2004). He defines rhythm as “everywhere where there is an interaction between place, time, and expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.”⁴³ Individual things only appear distinct because of ideology and material habits that have been trained over time. A “thing” is what he calls a “proximity of the presence” that the act of the rhythmanalyst—be they scientist, poet, or critic—situates in the “dramatic moment of becoming.”⁴⁴ As a project many years in the making, rhythmanalysis has developed useful concepts applicable to many disciplines, particularly his early division of rhythms into cyclical (natural) and linear (artificial) rhythms. Later, Lefebvre developed the concepts of *polyrhythmia* (many rhythms), *eurhythmia* (good or normal rhythms), *arrhythmia* (abnormal, pathological rhythms), and *isorhythmia* (equality of

⁴² Star and Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39,” 393.

⁴³ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Gerald Moore and Stuart Elden (Continuum, 2004), 15.

⁴⁴ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 23.

rhythms).⁴⁵ The goal of a rhythmanalysis, like microprocessing, pragmatology, and media archaeology, is to “separate as little as possible the scientific from the poetic” so that one can trace an object’s coming into being, not its absolute identity.⁴⁶

Though it may seem strange for literary critics to think of the domain of their practices as a “laboratory,” or authors as “scientists” and “lab technicians,” these concepts need not be so foreign. Rheinberger describes the production of representations occurring in the laboratory, a space created out of nineteenth-century national, social, and epistemological concerns. He prefers to call it an *experimental system*, or the set of nebulous rules, habits, and technologies that one uses “somewhere.”⁴⁷ Hagner expands this definition so that “a laboratory is where you find it.”⁴⁸ Epistemic things are produced both on grand scales as well as within the unexciting scribbles of a notebook, photographs from a mahogany-and-brass folding camera, and stories told to a motley group of adults and children. Experimental systems need not be limited to a particular age, a particular discipline, or a particular space. Literary critics who experiment with the close reading of objects in the production of the future can offer a narrative of the production of the object, not just an interpretation of the object itself.

Before we transition to the next section, it may be useful to take stock of where we have come. Each of these interpretive activities takes place at the level of details, which are themselves within socio-cultural arrangements. Despite their differences, microprocessing, pragmatology, media archaeology, and rhythmanalysis emphasize the following common traits of a detailed analysis of cultural objects and practices:

- 1) the embeddedness of the observer in relation to the observed
- 2) the bundling, weaving, or texting of objects within a historical a priori
- 3) the inclusion of a description that accounts for the emergence from what is unknown to what is known as experimental, or not-yet-defined (Kismet Bell, 2018)

⁴⁵ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 67–69.

⁴⁶ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 87.

⁴⁷ Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube*, 19–20.

⁴⁸ Michael Hagner, “The Electrical Excitability of the Brain: Toward the Emergence of an Experiment,” *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 21, no. 3 (2012): 244, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964704X.2011.595634>.

Epistemic Objects and Experimentation: Rabbit Folklore, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and Alba

After this exposition of the history of close reading and the introduction of new concepts—microprocessing, pragmatology, media archaeology, and rhythmanalysis—to the literary critical toolbox, it is time to re-introduce the epistemic object of our study: representations of rabbits. Though I cannot offer close readings in detail in this short space, I can gesture toward what an experimental close reading would look like. Rabbits appear as tropes of speed and fecundity in folklore; rabbits appear in emblems as symbols of cowardice; rabbits also appear in “great” literary works as markers of time, as in Lewis Carroll’s (1865) *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, which has been included in the literary canon of Victorian children’s literature and taught in schools for over a century. It has become part of the English-language cultural consciousness, in line with Bacon’s description of their resistant and prolific tendencies. Rabbits also appear as genetically modified organisms—*Alba*, for instance, is a green rabbit created in a laboratory in 2001. To completely define this “rabbit” concept or an object is impossible, yet we can delimit the contours of how this object came to be part of the dynamic of human scientific and literary representations. As epistemic objects, boundary objects, and rhythmic objects, representations of rabbits have shifted meaning and appearance among various groups for as long as humans have existed.

Let us first start with rabbits in folklore, which is traditionally the domain of speech. Whether one is hearing or reading African American *The Tarbaby and the Rabbit*, Native American trickster tales with a motif of rabbits outside society that are clever, helpful, or courageous, oral representations of these animals assume the embeddedness of the observer in relation to the observed. Rabbits in folklore are represented as liminal creatures, having already become domestic yet retaining their “wild” characteristics. The history of these animals is intertwined and woven into the history of humans. These tales can be etiological and tropological, like the Sioux legend of “How the Rabbit lost its tail.”⁴⁹ A close reading of any of these tales would have to include an account of the emergence of what is known from what is unknown. In oral cultures, life, geography, weather, and human and animal interaction coalesce into an immense laboratory for experimentation. The tale—the oral representation—is a mark of this process in which rabbits and humans come together. The experimental

⁴⁹ DeMello and Davis, *Stories Rabbits Tell: A Natural and Cultural History of a Misunderstood Creature*, 144–52.

system, the space for the production of the subject and object, is a fragment of what we call culture.

In graphic and typographical cultures, the material of representation is outside the body, thus extending one's memory to the scroll, codex, or book. An example of the rabbit in written form appears in the words of the medieval German writer Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170–1220). In his romance *Parzival*, he describes his thoughts that “zig-zag like a running rabbit,”⁵⁰ which Erasmus later describes as the hare known for its speed, borrowing from Horace's “Sooner will the tortoise outrun the hare.”⁵¹ Rather than devolve into a collection of rabbit tropes, we can conduct a *pragmatogony*, which assumes that the content of the *Parzival* book was not yet complete at the time of telling or writing the romance. The concept of the rabbit's fast and changing movement metaphorically stands in for the author's ability to represent orally and graphically. Instead of characterizing a domestic rabbit as a source of fur and food, Eschenbach utilizes the concept of a wild hare, unrestricted by society, to define the episodic structure of oral and written poetry. Both the rabbit and his thoughts need the discipline of inscriptions.

Here, it is not the content of the story of the character Parzival that is important—even though the iambic trimeter and short rhyming couplets are part of an oral tradition—but the material and form of the book as it comes into being. Whereas speech zig-zags between topics through metaphor and comparison, writing an extended romance like *Parzival* must be disciplined, sequential, and logically ordered with the tools of a pen, knife, and animal skin, just as Eschenbach's titular character Parzival says, “Like Parchment I was, black and white of equal degree.”⁵² In graphic cultures, the laboratory narrows to include a writer, a reader, and the parchment and ink by which thoughts become ordered, tamed, and mediated between them. We begin to see specialization of the tasks and routines and the diverse personas that appear. These characters can utilize tools in specific ways when they are present and become different characters when the tools are gone. As for the *Parzival* manuscript—the final product of this experimental system—if the micro-techniques out of which it arose are to be read closely, they should be read as embedded in the semiotic codes of this bio-technological milieu.

In the sixteenth century, we find the rabbit motif again in both medical and emblem literature. In his *Mirror of Medicine*, the German

⁵⁰ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival* (Fischer, 2008), 229.

⁵¹ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors (University of Toronto Press, 1989), 32:170.

⁵² von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, 229.

author Lorenz Fries uses the rabbit to symbolize food and disordered thought when he writes a short parable of good medical perception:

There was once a Lord from Strassburg who purchased as many little birds as there were birds to sell at the fish market. He gave these birds to his cook that he should prepare them. The cook, however, went and bought a special rabbit, and cooked it instead.⁵³

As a metaphor for the transition from writing to print, Fries uses the image of birds to stand in for all sensible experience and the rabbit to stand in for a single concept of this experience. The lord and the cook are represented as allegorical characters whom the reader understands as a disciplined doctor who can recognize all the diversity of experience (the birds) and the untrained cook, who sees only a rabbit. In addition to the common trope for a cook in the late Middle Ages as a simpleton or fool, the association between rabbit and food is clear. This reference also shifts the contours of the laboratory even further, adding more tools, techniques, and knowledge one must have to engage and represent the complete domestication of rabbits. The author, a medical doctor, is also experimenting with the medium of print technologies—printing the first German translation of medieval Latin medicine—and he views the product of his labor as anything but common, or anything but a rabbit. He had no idea the effect his book would have; it was reprinted over eight times in the sixteenth century alone.

A reference to a “hare” was also made in the medieval *Greek Anthology* (GA), a collection of poems, epigrams, and other poetic fragments that grew for over one thousand years to become a popular sourcebook for emblems. In the Planudean Appendix to the GA, an anonymous epigram appeared as “What Hector would say when wounded by the Greeks: Strike my body now after my death, for the very hares insult the body of a dead lion.”⁵⁴ This epigram was incorporated into the first emblem book by Andrea Alciato in 1531. Though more will be said about the Italian lawyer Alciato in the coming chapters, he created the emblem genre that stabilized the pairing of a verbal text with woodcut images so that the words and image each refer to the other. In Figure 1, the viewer sees two hares and a lion (Fig. 1), the motto “Cum larvis non luctandum” (Do not wrestle with the dead), and an interpretive poem that uses the rabbit as a memory device for avoiding cowardice and proper

⁵³ Lorenz Fries, *Spiegel Der Artzney* (Grünninger, 1518), 20–21.

⁵⁴ E. Capps et al., eds., *The Greek Anthology*, trans. W. R. Paton, The Loeb Classical Library (William Heinemann, 1918), 5:161.

respect for the deceased. This woodcut was reused in many emblem books throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The translated poem below the image reads,

Aeacide moriens percussu cuspidis Hector Qui toties hosteis vicerat antè suos. Comprimere haud potuit vocem insultantibus illis, Dum curru & pedibus nectere vincla parant. Distrahite ut libitum est sic cassi luce leonis, Convellunt barbam vel timidi lepores.

When he was dying from the wound dealt by the spear of Aeacus' descendant, Hector, who had so often before defeated his own enemies, could not keep silent as they triumphed over him, while preparing to tie the ropes to chariot and feet. Tear me as you will, he said; when the lion is deprived of the light of life, even cowardly hares pluck his beard.⁵⁵

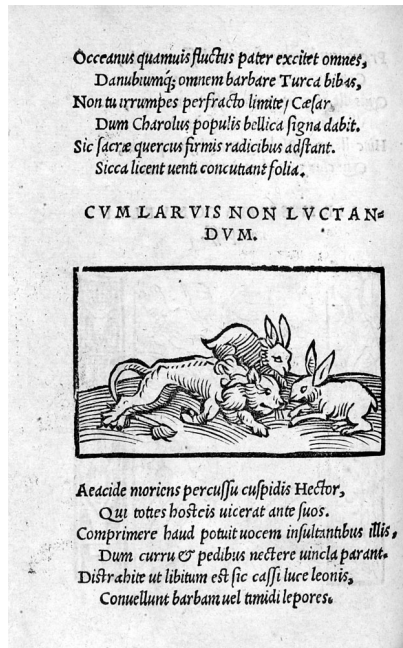


Figure 1. Andrea Alciato, “Cum Larvis non Luctandum,” *Emblematum liber*. Augsburg: Steyner, 28th February, 1531. Courtesy of the University of Glasgow, shelf number SM18.

⁵⁵ Andrea Alciato, *Emblematum Liber* (Heinrich Steyner, 1531), <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/books.php?id=A31a>.

The hybrid representation of an emblem's words and images offers an epistemic problem for the reader to solve. At a basic level, the animals are allegories for a hierarchy within creation that is leveled at death: Hector and Achilles, Trojans and Achaeans, and lions and hares are only matter when deprived of life. However, as readers move back and forth between the text and the image, the "light of life" returns to the material page.

We will explore the emblem and its epistemic significance more in Chapter One, but now we can return to Francis Bacon's description of rabbits as both resistant to illness and fecund in his essay "Of Plantations." The essay genre, as a sequencing of aphorisms, attempts to remove the "harebrained" description of speech that was mentioned by von Eschenbach. In a related fashion, essay thirty-three, which comes right before "Of Plantations," offers an attempt on "Of Discourse" that focuses on the proper way to conduct speech. Bacon's essays already show the beginnings of Kittler's mechanical speech, which is "deprived of life." For Bacon, discourse meant the codes of conduct related to speech, and excellent speech would always "vary and intermingle speech of the present occasion with arguments, tales with reasons, asking of questions with telling of opinions, and jest with earnest."⁵⁶ Courtiers were trained with commonplaces and sentences to master the trivium of knowledge (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) and to intersperse speech with these special sayings. The essay form, however, disciplines these fragments into a collection of sequenced sentences, an aphorism of fact and observation. Bad speech, Bacon states in transitioning from "Of Discourse" to "Of Plantations," appears "as we see in beasts, that those that are weakest in the course, yet nimblest in the turn; as it is betwixt the greyhound and the hare."⁵⁷

In this example, the rabbit of health and fecundity contrasts with the noble rabbits of sport and quickness. DeMello and Davis write that the domestic rabbit we see today and the wild rabbits (hares) bounding about the forest are very different creatures.⁵⁸ What's more, "from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, wild rabbits were nurtured for meat and sport, primarily for the gentry."⁵⁹ There is no way to know if Bacon was describing a practice already in place or advocating a new practice to be

⁵⁶ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 455.

⁵⁷ Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 457.

⁵⁸ DeMello and Davis, *Stories Rabbits Tell: A Natural and Cultural History of a Misunderstood Creature*, 6.

⁵⁹ DeMello and Davis, *Stories Rabbits Tell: A Natural and Cultural History of a Misunderstood Creature*, 34.