Heaps of Heaps: Accumulating Verse

BRAD PASANEK

Crossing literary history, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, text mining, and bibliography, my study of poetic diction renovates a classic topic, a topic itself about new-making: that is, the culture of neoclassicism. The project poses a question to the long eighteenth century: where does new poetry come from? And it considers the converse: how much poetic language is recycled? I consider the aesthetic limits of reuse in a changing regime of copyright, neoclassical propriety, and new market opportunities; and I investigate, with an interest in complicating periodization, the seams between the Restoration, the so-called Age of Sensibility and the Romantic moment.

My project is unwaveringly single-minded in its effort to map the appearance and reappearance of a set of two-word phrases—bigrams (constituents of what Samuel Johnson characterizes as poetry’s “glittering accumulation”) as they circulate through reprints and new verse and index the rate of text reuse in the period’s verse. Focused on my unit of analysis, I am pulling poems apart and isolating elemental adjective-noun pairings. This close attention to and marking of phrases is abetted by computational means, so that each phrase I highlight is automatically located in other poems. An entire system of poetic diction, its scope, detail, and structural affordances, is to be described in order to understand creative reuse and the spread of cliché. Early, clumsy work is visible at https://dictionary.herokuapp.com/bigrams/

In narrowly attending to poetic diction, I further the separate concerns of critical bibliography, historical poetics, and the digital humanities. The poetry published between Milton’s Paradise Lost and Wordsworth’s Prelude has a surprising, abiding relation to our present, which I would further stipulate both by describing early quantitative studies of poetic diction, which belong to the pre-digital history of the digital humanities, and by considering and sharpening more recent critiques of Google’s Ngram Viewer and related research in so-called “culturomics.” I propose a major overhaul of date-of-first publication metadata organizing important text collections (current efforts at “macroanalysis” are as much stymied by bad metadata as by bad OCR [Optical Character Recognition software], especially in the eighteenth century). Thus far I have proposed to work in the mainline of digital humanities. But in the wake of the 2016 election, poll aggregation, statistical panic, and the wrongheaded claim that big data augurs the end of theory are overdue for détournement. With tongue pressed in cheek, I am planning to adopt and travesty econometric methods in my study of the neoclassical culture industry and its “poetic coinage”—the period’s favored metaphor for making new metaphors. (The trope survives in the poet Vanessa Place’s recent assertion that “Poetry is a kind of money,”—a line stolen from Kay Ryan.) New-minted phrases wear out in circulation, becoming stale and hackneyed. By counting and tallying, I can plot the rate at which a token like “native land” (in Virgilian epic) or “finny tribe” (periphrasis for fish) lose their poetic sheen and become commonplace stock, day-old fish. Where Daniel Tiffany writes of diction’s tinselled gloss in My Silver Planet, it is a gloomier satirical and Brechtian underworld I aim at: laboring class verse, mechanical phraseology, and the saturnine poetics of William Blake’s “same dull round.” My hijacked neoliberal frame for neoclassical poetry brings
pressing concerns to critique: Frédéric Kaplan, for one, has identified the way Google’s Adwords price even our terms of protest as part of an expanding “linguistic capitalism.”