Modernity and Middle English

Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.
—Richard Feynman, “What is Science?”

We are reading a book of criticism by a poet, who is reading and interpreting a medieval poem. One would expect that the humanist approach to this (my own) would adopt one of the lines of criticism of the past few decades (New Criticism, Deconstruction, New Historicism, the New Philology), whereas the scientific response (here by a particle physicist) would insist on an older more conservative approach, arguing on the basis of lexical information, old philology, material evidence from the manuscripts (and so on). At least, this is what one of us speculates. But in fact, our arguments and assumptions are exactly the opposite of what we expect: the humanist adopts a quasi-scientific approach, the physicist a more literary-critical one.

The poem is a simple one, read in this case by Susan Stewart.1 And the interpretation turns on the following lines:

Nou goth sonne vnder wod,—
me reweth, marie thi faire Rode.
Nou goth sonne vnder tre,—
me reweth, marie thi sone and the.

---

This is quoted from a standard anthology by Carleton Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*.\(^2\) Stewart’s note (I’m not sure she authored it) adds: “Brown has taken the text from the Bodl[eian]. Ms. Arch. Selden.”\(^3\) One of us rather unkindly points out the irrelevance of this note: “Bodl.” cannot be expanded to “Bodl[eian].” The period is also otiose once the abbreviation is expanded, wrongly here. To identify the manuscript as from the Selden collection is not really meaningful, since there is no number. It would be more responsible, from a scholarly perspective, simply to quote Brown directly.

Of course, when we are doing or performing literary criticism, we rarely understand the full meaning or function of technical notes in a critical edition. And there ought to be a way to acknowledge that responsibly: “See note in Brown” (that is, “I do not fully understand its significance, nor if it bears on the present argument”). Yet modern literary criticism does not permit such statements: instead, we follow the Myth of the Full Presence, not only of the text, but of all information about the text. For a moment, reading and writing literary criticism or perhaps any scholarship in the humanities, we are in that magical world where we have access to all knowledge concerning the present subject and are only arguing about how everything fits together or perhaps debating the political and social implications of it all. But surely we know we are speaking from the grandest ignorance. We do not know the author of this poem, its background; we might not even know the language it is written in. And our scholarship, if it can be called that, consists of gerrymandering a topic of discussion in such a way that no one other than ourselves can be conversant with it. Here is Stewart again:

> In one of the earliest English lyrics on Christ’s passion, the anonymous poem, or perhaps fragment of a longer work, beginning “Nou goth sonne under wod,” the possibilities of

\(^3\) Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 365.
parallel times occurring within a deictic ‘now’ that is itself taking time truly structure the entire work.

Nou goth sonne under wod,—
me reweth, marie thi faire Rode.
Nou goth sonne under tre—
me reweth, marie, thi sone and the.

The poem is in the pure stress four-beat meter we last read in Caedmon’s “Hymn,” but it is also in couplets….The sone that goth under wod is both the sun setting behind a wood on the horizon and the son Christ, going under the wood of the cross….“I pity this faire rode’s rosy complexion, the color evoking the sunset’s reflection.” and “I pity thy fair rood” or cross, as well as “scion” or “offspring”….the “tre” is both the wood of the rood and the place of Christ in the Trinity.⁴

The “tre” suggests to Stewart other groups of three (“thrie”) besides the Trinity—for example, the three Marys—also trust (treow).

The reading is dazzling, but many of the particular suggestions are philologically suspect. The Caedmon hymn is not written in “pure stress,” nor related to this poem metrically. The sound th- (three) is not t- (tree), nor are the vowel sounds in tre, treowe, and thrie the same, as even their spelling indicates. “Tree” and “truth” are no more puns in Middle English than they are today. Rode does not sound the same as rood nor is it related to ruddy; son and sun are only phonetically equivalent in their modern English cognates. Many professional medievalists, however, provide support for these readings.⁵

⁴ Ibid., 202.
⁵ See, e.g., Edmund Reiss, “A Critical Approach to the Middle English Lyric,” College English 27, no. 5 (1966): 373–79, often reprinted. For Reiss, sonne, wod, Rode, and tre, “all ambiguous,” are key words, and it hardly matters, say, “whether or not sonne and sone are homophonic” (375). This seems to mean that if a reader with only minimal fluency in Middle English might confuse them, that confusion is a legitimate feature of the poem.
The most important point concerns the pair *wod* and *rode*. Stewart’s interpretation “evoking the sunset’s reflection” is put into quotations, as if her voice and the voice of the poet were merged. I am not sure whether Stewart is here paraphrasing the poet, or her own reading of the poet:

And that interior expression in turn breaks into two referents: “I pity Marie, thi faire rod (or rosy complexion, the color evoking the sunset’s reflection)” and “I pity thy fair rood” or cross, as well as “scion” or “offspring.”

The question is a philological one: in Middle English, can *wod* (“wood”) rhyme with *rod* (“cross”)? And the answer under the rules of Old Philology is no. There is no more relation between the sounds of these words in Middle English than there is between modern English *rode* and *wood*. There might be a convention of rhyming (visual? part-rhymes?) where these words rhyme, but such a convention was never operative in early English literary history.

Brown’s textual note is important here: one scribe had the same thought that Stewart expanded into a literary-critical reading of the lines, seeing in *rode (?)*, or whatever might have been written in the source, the word for cross. But to communicate that meaning to a contemporary reader required changing the rhyming word from *wood = “wood”* to *wod = “mad.” A sound argument thus could be advanced that since a near contemporary saw a confusion of words there (that is, they saw, as we do, the word rode as meaning “cross”), then why shouldn’t we? Yet even the supporting scribe provides evidence that refutes the possibility of the modern reading: a medieval reader who interprets *rod* as meaning “cross” cannot accept the rhyme *wod = “wood.”

This inspired reading, which is not unique to Stewart, is a reflection of modern philological training. It is also a reflection of modern teaching of historical poems. One of the few Old Eng-

---

lish poems read or anthologized is “The Dream of the Rood,” a poem (or title) every schoolchild of English literature knows (or once knew!), one so familiar it is rarely translated as “The Dream of the Cross.” Thus, modern readers of literature come to this Middle English poem prepared to pass a vocabulary quiz: rod = rood = cross. And they can apply here their knowledge of Old English, however minimal that may be.

My friend the particle physicist is unconvinced by this logic, but refuses to concede that Stewart’s reading is valid solely on its own impressionistic terms; to be accepted, it must be valid in historical terms as well, at least, as history is and must be understood by humanists. I believe my friend is projecting onto the humanities what seems to me (naively) a scientific assumption: a statement is valid insofar as it corresponds to a state of affairs, here defined philologically. I am willing to let Stewart’s statements pass (in the end, what difference does it make?); the particle physicist is suddenly less generous.

**Humanities vs. Science**

Having beaten this argument to death, the particle physicist and I began to consider why we were arguing at all. I don’t criticize her credentials in humanities, and she does not in turn deride my ignorance of basic principles of physics. To what extent do the divergent ways we approach the problem of this poem and Stewart’s reading reflect our training, or even the nature of our fields? Is my reading (which turned out to be dodderingly conservative) better than the reading of the scientist? Or was that reading simply a reflection of my own anxiety as a humanist — that is, my attempt to imitate science, or a humanist’s version of it? Or as the humanist in this discussion, am I longing to be a poet (as Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom once claimed critics to be), and resentful of the readings of a real one?

The question (for me) is not what science is or how science is opposed to the humanities, since I am not sure these entities are
defined well enough to be opposed, even in popular polemics.\textsuperscript{7} Those divisions seem in large part the result of arbitrary (but socially material) divisions in the history of American and British educational systems of the late twentieth century, divisions then projected onto the presumed objects and methods of their respective fields.

Perhaps the question should be rephrased: what is meant by “science” (the concept) when it is invoked by a self-styled member of the humanist camp? That is, how does the invocation of science (or scientific method) function in the language of humanists? Examples from my early training are unsettling: many articles of mid-twentieth-century criticism claimed to be scientific, as does D.F. McKenzie’s classic bibliographical article on “Printers of the Mind.”\textsuperscript{8} In this case, scholars assume without comment that there is something rigorous about scientific study or method, and they wish their own humanistic arguments to partake of that. Something is worthy of being called science, the same way as something is worthy (whatever that means) of being called, say, “history” or “philology” or “criticism,” perhaps further qualified by a word such as “genuine,” “true,” or “new.” Under this verbal system, a field such as science or a medium-hard history becomes an undefined Other that opposes or humiliates all one’s enemies.

Yet according to my friend, citing Feyerabend, “facts” (whatever they are) will not solve the problem: “science is much more

\textsuperscript{7} This is the way the question is phrased or understood in Stephen Jay Gould’s arguments with E.O. Wilson: there is a thing called science, and something else called humanities, both givens. See Stephen Jay Gould, \textit{The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister’s Pox} (New York: Harmony Books, 2003); E.O. Wilson, \textit{Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge} (New York: Knopf, 1998); and E.O. Wilson, \textit{The Social Conquest of Earth} (New York: Liveright Books, 2013).

sloppy and irrational than its methodological image,”⁹ and there is really no such thing as science, anyway. The word *science* may be a single word, but there is no single concept, method, or institution that corresponds to that word.¹⁰

When I first got to graduate school, I pretended to be serious. The first seminar I took was of a then familiar genre that administrators still encourage faculty to develop — one based on a concept or argument, rather than subject matter. This one was in medieval literature, and the topic or theme was “The Creator.” We would read a number of texts, literary, philosophical, even glosses, all interesting in and of themselves, and see how they reflected this theme.¹¹ The crux of the course was that the word creator meant that any medieval writer was like God, insofar as each was “creating”; their activity was itself “like” any medieval work on the seven days of creation, or any medieval work about any other medieval work on the seven days of creation. This seemed even then a clear case of *petitio principii* (I didn’t know the principle then), and given my antipathy to authority, it was, I imagined naively, us (if indeed I had an ally) against them.

A Canadian student presented a completely irrelevant report on Northrup Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, which even then (1976) was twenty years old and more than a decade out of fashion. This was the first report that did not consist of unfunny, graduate school puns on the word *create* and seemed to me a great coup: it was invoking science (or something called science) against what seemed then nothing more than a form of humanistic belles-lettres. When I read Frye today, and recall that I once considered his admirable discourse as exactly what he claims it to be — a form of science — I am amazed at my earlier self. Today, the only relation to science I see in Frye is his own invocation of the term. Yet convinced as I was by his assertions

---

¹⁰ Ibid., 238.
¹¹ More accurately, we were “assigned” a number of texts, since few of the students bothered to read them.
then, I can only suspect that that is why I have become so skeptical of them since.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} Northrup Frye, \textit{Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); see Polemical Introduction: “It seems absurd to say that there may be a scientific element in criticism when there are dozens of learned journals based on the assumption that there is, and hundreds of scholars engaged in a scientific procedure related to literary criticism. Evidence is examined scientifically; previous authorities are used scientifically; fields are investigated scientifically; texts are edited scientifically. Prosody is scientific in structure; so is phonetics; so is philology. Either literary criticism is scientific, or all these highly trained and intelligent scholars are wasting their time on some kind of pseudo-science like phrenology” (8).