I intend today to continue what Barbara Smith has recently characterized as my “saturation bombing” of stylistics. As before, the focus of the discussion will be on the relationship between description and interpretation. In “What Is Stylistics, and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?—Part I,” I found that in the practice of stylisticians of whatever school that relationship was always arbitrary, less a matter of something demonstrated than of something assumed before the fact or imposed after it. Five years later, the situation has changed somewhat, but in terms of the claims traditionally made for and by stylistics, it is no more satisfactory, merely unsatisfactory in a different way. Charting that way will be the business of this paper, and I will begin by rehearsing my conclusions in advance:

1.) Stylistic analysis is of two kinds, but those who practice the art do not distinguish between them, even though the assump-
tions underlying them are contradictory.

2.) One kind of stylistics is incoherent, even on its own terms; the other is coherent on its own terms, but they are not terms which the stylisticians can comfortably acknowledge, because to acknowledge them would be to admit that the goal of stylistics—an objective account of form and meaning—is an impossible one.

The first point to be made, then, is that the proponents of stylistics literally don't know what they are doing, although, typically, they preface their analyses with programmatic statements that suggest a clear-eyed understanding of both purpose and method. Here are excerpts from the opening paragraphs of what Roger Fowler has dubbed the "new stylistics."3

This paper starts from what might be called the Ohmann Hypothesis... "stylistic preferences reflect cognitive preferences."4

It is a commonplace of literary criticism to observe that form and content in a poem are closely related. Four poems by Wallace Stevens will be analyzed from a formal standpoint. Then an attempt will be made to show how the formal analysis is closely related to what the poem is about.5

In the model of language production that is assumed for the purposes of this paper, a speaker or writer first constructs a lexical constellation which mimics a state of affairs.6

These paragraphs share a vocabulary, and in particular a set of related verbs: "reflect," "relate," "mime," and, in later appearances, "embody," "correlate with," and "express." Together they point to the central assertion of stylistics as it is forthrightly stated by Fowler: "It is possible to say the same thing in different words." It is an assumption that, as Fowler says, one must make given the two-stage procedure it authorizes. First, formal features patterns are discovered by the application of some descriptive apparatus, and then they are found to be expressive of or reflect or mime a meaning or a content which stands apart from them and which could have been expressed (or reflected or mimed by) some other pattern, or which could have been packaged in formal patterns that did not reflect it at all, but merely presented it. As Keyser observes, the "demonstration of a form-content correlation will be significant only if it is logically possible for the formal structure encountered in a poem to bear no relation to the poem's content" (WS, p. 597); that is, only if it is possible to point to a formal structure without already having
invoked some interpretive principle.

It is here at the heart of stylistics that one feels the contradictory pull of two demands. Only if forms are separable from the meanings they encase and adorn can there be said to be a choice between them, and a question for stylistics to answer (what is the relationship between this form and that meaning?). But only if the relationship of the form to the meaning can be shown to be necessary (indeed inevitable) will its demonstration escape the charge of being arbitrary, of being capable of assertion in any number of directions.

Epstein’s analysis of “Lycidas,” line 167, is a small but instructive case in point. The line reads, “Sunk though he be beneath the watry floor,” and it exhibits, he says, “a remarkable degree of objective mimesis through a combination of syntactic and phonological structures” (SRA, p. 54). The most important of these involves the “movements of the tongue and lower jaw,” which by accomplishing “the stressed vowels of this line mime a motion from mid central to high front to back.” One wonders what Epstein means here by “mime”; as he typically uses it the verb indicates a relationship of distance, i.e., different from, but imitative of; but there is no distance between the movements of the tongue and jaw and the central, front and back positions which those movements successively occupy; those movements do not mime a motion, they perform it. The equivocation is of no consequence, except insofar as it is evidence of Epstein’s desire to assert mimesis even in a case where he could have had the real thing. What is important, however, is what this motion (be it mimetic or performative) is itself said to mime: “The motion in turn mimes the relationship low-high-low expressed in the lexis—the body of Edward King on the sea floor (low) and the surface of the sea (high).” The high front vowels mime the notion “the watery floor far beneath which King has sunk.” This is arbitrary in so many directions that one suspects it must be a parody. In the first place the two patterns—one phonological, the other lexical—are not parallel in a way that would allow the first to be mimetic of the second. The movement low-high-low occurs on a vertical plane, while the movement mid central-high front-back occurs on the horizontal or curvi-linear plane of the roof of the mouth (itself a metaphor which if taken seriously—and why not?—would at the very least complicate the problem of mimesis and give it a different shape than Epstein proposes.)

The only genuine parallel between the two patterns would seem to be the presence in each of three successive and alternating states or stages; but even this parallel will not bear examination, because Epstein’s description of the “lexical constellation” (that is, of what the line is saying) is open to challenge. It is by no means obvious that the line expresses the relationship low-high-low; indeed it would make equal and better sense (and one in accord with Milton’s practice elsewhere) to say that the movement described is from low (sunk) to lower (beneath) to lower still. In
order to give the phrase "watry floar" the value of "high," Epstein has to treat it as a surface (a word he uses), but the effect of joining the two words (in what is almost an oxymoron) is to call attention to the way in which this particular floor does not have the properties of a surface (it is "watry"). The other or "low" pole in Epstein's pattern is provided by a genuine surface, the floor of the sea, but nowhere is it asserted that King rests there or anywhere else; indeed, for many the poignancy of the poem derives from that fact that the location of his body is unknown.

Of course this is a matter of interpretation, and I am not arguing for a particular reading of "Lycidas." My point is that Epstein's reading is no less an interpretation, and that rather than standing in an independent and confirming relationship to a structural pattern, it is produced by the exigencies of that pattern. Epstein asserts that the phonological structure is worth noticing only because of the "polar situation" it mimics; but in fact the dependency is the other way around: the line is read as it is because a structural pattern already discerned needs a meaning that it can be said to mime, and the critic is determined to provide one. (It could have been the other way around.) It is not that what Epstein does cannot be done, but that it cannot not be done because there are no constraints on the manufacture of the correlations his method uncovers. Is there a line whose articulation does not involve some back and forth movement of the tongue, and is there a sense which could not be brought into some relation (of expression, counterpoint, opposition, irony) with that movement? Even those verses which Epstein cites as instances of non-mimesis could be shown to be mimetic by someone sufficiently committed to the principle. All you need is a meaning and a formal pattern (any meaning and any formal pattern will do), and the pressure of the question "how do they relate?" and a relation will always be found.

II

It is certainly found by Keyser in his analysis of Stevens's "Anecdote of a Jar." He begins by declaring that "the immediate impression one receives upon reading this poem is that it is akin in some way to a painting" (WS, p. 586). This curious judgement is delivered as if it were a truth universally acknowledged, one that required neither defense nor explanation. Once delivered, however, it is abandoned as abruptly as it was introduced, and Keyser proceeds to a discussion of the poem's formal features. The most prominent of these, we are told, involves a succession of variations on the syllable round: "round," "surround," "around," "round" again, and "ground." Between the second and third stanzas round is replaced as an organizing principle by a series of air rhymes: "air," "everywhere," and "bare," and by the alliteration in the penultimate line of "bird" and "bush." An unexceptionable conclusion follows: "There is, then, a nonoverlapping succession of rhyming devices which appear in a
serial fashion . .. beginning with variations on *round*, moving to end-rhyme, then to alliteration and terminating with identical rhyme between the first and last lines” (WS, p. 587). As always, the question is where does one go from here, and Keyser, who is nothing if not forthright, tells us: “If . . . there exists a relationship between form and meaning in this poem, it should be possible for us to find an interpretation congenial to the structure that we have already established, . . . the successive nonoverlapping series of rhyming devices” (WS, p. 588).

My point is that given this kind of determination it would be impossible not to find an interpretation that was congenial in the sense that it is available for correlation with the poem’s structural properties. In less than a page and one half it is duly found, and then summarized: “A property of the jar is mentioned and the relationship of the property to the environment is specified. With respect to the property round, the jar made the wilderness surround the hill. With respect to the property tall and of a port in air, the jar dominated the wilderness. With respect to the property gray and bare, the jar contrasted its own barrenness to the implied life of the wilderness” (WS, p. 588). Basically, this is an expansion into a stilted language of the phrase “took dominion everywhere.” It is followed by the promised relation of the poem’s structural properties to its now discovered meaning. Keyser recalls that his formal analysis had uncovered a succession of variations on the syllable “round,” which therefore dominates the first two stanzas of the poem just as the jar dominates the wilderness. Or in his inflated account: “The actual phonological shape of the property of the jar which, in English, takes the form of the word *round* imposes an order, just as the semantic property “round,” which the jar possesses, imposes an order on the wilderness. Using the shape of the word *round* to impose an order on the poem parallels using the actual shape of the object to impose an order on the wilderness” (WS, p. 589). This relation, he continues, also “exists with respect to the second property, namely *tall* and *of a port in air*. Once again, the physical shape of a word used to describe the property, i.e. *air*, imposes a new rhyming order on the poem . . . and this parallels the imposition of a new perception on the wilderness by the semantic content of the phrases of which the word is part” (WS, p. 589).

The first thing to say about this is that Keyser cheats, even on his own terms, when he extends his argument from the syllable “round” to the syllable “air.” Unlike “round,” “air” does not describe that property of the jar which imposes an order on the wilderness. Only if the repeated sound were “all” (as in “tall”) would the syllable function as he says it does, in an intimate relationship with the specified property. This, however, is an internal criticism of the procedure. The more serious criticism is that it is trivial because its shape is in no way constrained. Having decided that the poem is about the imposition of order, and having also decided that it would be desirable to find a formal pattern that mimes or parallels
that imposition, it would be impossible not to succeed (just as it would be impossible not to find a theme which an already observed formal pattern might mime.) Some pattern or other—alliterative, assonantal, consonantal—will always be uncovered and designated as the dominating one, and in the unlikely absence of a suitable pattern, that absence could itself be interpreted as an ironic and deliberate (and therefore mimetic) non-mimesis which expressed or reflected the absence of a relationship between language and reality.

In other words, the exercise is an arbitrary one, ruled by the determination to have a relation rather than by a procedure which demonstrates it. The phonological shape of “round” imposes an order on the poem only if you have already decided that the poem is about order. That is, the pattern emerges under the pressure of an interpretation and does not exist as independent evidence of it. In the event of a different interpretation, the pattern would be seen differently and be evidence in another direction. One might decide, for example, that the poem was about the many ways of viewing a jar (as in the thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird); it would then be a series of puns: the jar is round; it is also a round; it is a superround (super is the Latin for “sur” and means over, above and on top of); and as the focus of attention it functions as a super-round. In the context of this reading, the pattern of sound would reflect difference and variation rather than similarity and order. Or alternately, one’s reading might pay particular attention to the first person pronoun and regard the poem as the utterance of a limited persona, someone who is seeking the meaning of his experience, and fails to recognize it in the patterns of his own language: the repetition of “round,” a syllable hidden in words which pay no particular attention to it, would then mime the psychological state of unawareness.

Of course it is not necessary that an interpretation be involved with the syllable “round” at all. Phonological patterns do not announce themselves naturally; they are picked out by an interested perception, and a perception otherwise interested will pick out another pattern. It is possible, for example, to read the poem as a meditation on nature in its benign and threatening forms. This distinction could then be seen in the migration of the syllable “ill” from “hill” to “wilderness,” back to “hill” and then to “wilderness” again, and finally ending in the triumph of threatening nature when the sound is transformed into “wild.” My little phonological drama has the same status as Keyser’s: his sounds dominate and order, mine migrate and oppose, but in both cases the pattern as perceived is the product of an interpretation and not independent confirmation of it. As I have said elsewhere, this is a game that is just too easy to play.

Keyser himself shows how easy it is when in a final paragraph he reinterprets his formal patterns as evidence for his impression that the poem is akin to a still-life painting: “The apparent framing of this poem
between the repeated phrases in Tennessee which appear in the opening and the closing line of the poem provides a verbal counterpart of a frame to the still life in words" (WS, p. 589). Somehow Keyser doesn’t see that his conviction that the poem is like a painting is what leads him first to see a repetition, then to characterize it as a frame, and pretends instead that the homology is between two independently existing systems. In the next paragraph he does it again (and he could have done it forever) when he succeeds (it is an assured success) in seeing in the phonological order an allegory of the poetic act. Here at least he has the right word, although it is applied in the wrong place. Whether or not the poem is an allegory, his performance surely is, in the discredited Ruskinian sense of reading a prefabricated meaning into patterns that have no necessary relationship to it whatsoever.

Allegory is also the mode of his analysis of “The Snowman.” Here the formal description is of a syntax that has continually to be revised: while “the opening stanza constitutes what appears at first sight to be a complete sentence . . . the beginning of the next stanza indicates that an ellipsis has occurred and that the sentence which apparently terminated at the end of the first stanza is, in fact, the first member of a coordinate sentence” (WS, p. 590). The sequence repeats itself in the relationship between the second and third stanzas, when a “new ellipsis shows that once again we have been mistaken in our syntactic analysis, and we must now go back and reanalyze” (WS, p. 591). The pattern is varied somewhat in the last stanza, for “whereas the second stanza paralleled the first and the third paralleled the second, each time within a conjoined sentence, we now find that the last stanza parallels the first four, itself in a conjoined sentence.” As a result, Keyser concludes, the poem consistently “demands that we analyze and then reanalyze yet again as we pass linearly and in time from one point to another in the structure” (WS, p. 595).

It is at this point that Keyser makes his characteristic move. Let us, he says, “look at the relationship between the formal device described above and the meaning of the poem.” What he means, of course, is let us look for a meaning of the poem that can stand in an iconic relationship to the formal pattern we have discerned. That meaning is immediately found when Keyser decides, with some help from Stevens and Frank Kermode, that the poem is about the “need to perceive reality in a clear fashion” (WS, p. 596). In the course of the poem “we find that in the implied regimen needed to move toward a clear perception of reality, there is a constant change of perspective. Thus Stevens observes that to begin with, one must have a mind of winter, i.e. a particular state of mind in order to regard the frost. However, this state of mind is not in itself reliable for one must have had it for a long time in order to behold the junipers shagged with ice and not think of misery” (WS, p. 596). The conclusion can be seen coming from half a mile away, and in due time it arrives: “We saw that . . . the poem consists of a syntactic pattern whose main characteristic
is that its structure at any one time seems clear but which, at the next moment, requires a complete reanalysis. . . . This designed need to change syntactic perspective cannot more closely parallel the sense of the poem which is to change one's outward perspective in order to more accurately understand reality” (WS, pp. 596-97).

In this wholly uninteresting reading the poem becomes a “how-to” manual, a developing set of directions for achieving a clear understanding of reality. Curiously, the reading would have been much more interesting if Keyser were more aware of what he is doing. He thinks that he is discerning an independent formal pattern and relating it to a content, but in fact he is eviscerating a pattern that is not, at least as he first comes upon it, formal. This is because his description is not, as he claims, of a syntax, but of a mind in the act of doing something; and it is therefore a description that follows upon a set of psychological assumptions about what people do when they read. What Keyser is assuming that they do is revise, and a complete description, one that was responsible to the principles that made it possible, would trace the career of that revising and not merely note it as preliminary to allegorizing it.

In other words, while in the analysis of “Anecdote of a Jar” there is no legitimate, that is constrained, direction in which one might go after pointing out the appearances of “round,” here the direction in which one might go is built into the initial observation, but Keyser refuses to take it. This does not, however, prevent us from taking it, if only in order to see what kind of reading Keyser could have produced if he had seen what his own vocabulary so clearly implies: that the act of revising has as its object not merely a syntactic structure, but the structure of the reader’s understanding. That is, each time we revise or reanalyze, what changes is not only our understanding of the syntax, but our understanding of what is required to regard the frost and the junipers; and the shape of that change is a complicating of what it means to “have a mind of winter.” At first it seems to mean no more than that one’s mind should be full of wintry thoughts or be unsympathetic in some undefined way; the phrase, in short, seems to be metaphorical. But then, with each realization that the syntax, and therefore the unit of sense, is not complete, comes the realization that the requirements for a clear and undistorting perception have grown tighter. They grow wire-tight in stanza three, where the newly specified requirement is “not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind.” “Wintry thoughts,” then, are precisely what must be avoided, and if we pause at the end of the line—“and not to think”—the injunction becomes even more sweeping: one must not have any thoughts at all: that is, one must efface oneself completely and become an observer so pure that he adds nothing to a reality which will be unmediated because he as a medium—as something obstructing—is no more. Only then, when he is nothing himself, will his self not be interposed between him and the nothing—the thing that is not an object of human thought—that is. But the
reader who understands that this is what it means to have a mind of winter purchases that understanding at the price of being able to have one, since the act of understanding, of apprehending from a distance, is precisely what must be given up. What we finally discover is that what is required is a mind not active in the way it must be for the discovery to be made. The demand that the reader reanalyze does not parallel a program for the achieving of a pure perception; rather it is inseparable from the realization that such a perception is forever unavailable.

Now I am not claiming for this hypothetical reading that it is truer to the poem or to Stevens's intention than the reading Keyser actually performs; but that it is more likely to convince someone of its trueness because there is a clear line of argument from its uncovering of a formal structure to the stipulation of that structure's meanings. That is to say, given the assumptions already imbedded in the notion of revising, a reading which follows the career of that revising will have an immediate, persuasive force. There is no point in the reading where the analyst must stop in order to cast around for a meaning that can be related to his forms, because the description of those forms is at the same time a stipulation of their meanings. The assumption (it is Keyser's) that what a reader does is revise leads necessarily to an account of that revising, and that account is already involved with the determination and redetermination of sense. In short, in the second reading, the formal description is already an interpretation, and, in fact, the so-called formal elements come into view only because an interpretive assumption (about what readers do) is already in force. What Keyser does is detach his own formal patterns from the interpretive act which made them available, and then he proceeds to find for them an interpretation with which they have nothing, necessarily, to do.

There is nothing inevitable about his analysis because at the crucial moment (when you would ask why that) the relationship between his form and his content is simply asserted. He would have achieved inevitability if he had only read out of his formal pattern the content it already, implicitly, had. And, indeed, this is what he does in the first of his analyses, although for reasons that should now be clear, he won't admit that he is doing it.

The poem is "The Death of a Soldier," and in it Keyser discerns three significant formal choices. Stevens has:

1. . . . selected verbs which can under no circumstances take agents.
2. He has selected the nonagentive use of verbs which can but need not take agents.
3. In the two instances where he has selected the agentive sense of a verb . . . he has displayed the verbs in a syntactic construction which requires that the agent be deleted from the surface of a poem. (WS, p. 582)
It is important to realize that these formalizations are different in kind from the others we have encountered, from the back and forth movement of the tongue, or the variation of a single syllable, or a syntax whose description becomes more and more complex. These patterns, at least as they are presented by Epstein and Keyser, are purely formal, and they acquire a semantic value only by being made icons of a meaning independent of them. Here the meaning is built into the formalization, and when the time comes all you have to do is read it out. Thus, when Keyser asks himself "whether there is a relationship between the suppression of . . . agency and the meaning of the poem?", the question is a rhetorical one because the suppression of agency is the meaning of the poem. I don't mean that it truly is, in some indisputable way, but that in the context of this formal description the specification of that meaning is inevitable, and this is enough to distinguish the analysis from those in which the specification of meaning is an act of prestidigitation. that is, Keyser can legitimately claim for this analysis what he claims for all the others (and if he doesn't claim it, it's hard to know what he is claiming): that the parallel between form and meaning could not be drawn in any other direction; and the claim can be made because it is not a parallel between form and meaning, but a spelling out of the meaning that has from the very beginning been the content of this formal category.

The curious thing is that Keyser feels obliged to assert the contrary and to deny the real coherence—a persuasive coherence—his analysis has. His conclusion makes that clear: "The manipulation of syntax and semantics to remove all vestiges of an agent . . . corresponds to the world of the poem in which there are no initiators" (WS, p. 583). The key word here is "corresponds," which is in the same line of work as correlates with, parallels, mimes, and reflects; it implies distance, but in this case there is none, because the notion of a world in which there are no initiators is derived directly (and not by way of correspondence) from a grammar without any visible agency. Keyser claims to have shown that "the form of his poem reflects its content" (WS, p. 584): but his formal description merely yields up the content it has always had. He refuses to see this because he is committed to keeping the two levels of his system separate; but in this example, at least, there is only one level; we can call it formal or we can call it semantic; what we can not do is maintain the fiction of a distinction.

That distinction, however, is essential to the stylistician's enterprise, since it is the availability of a purely formal component—of formal features that one can pick out independently of any interpretation of them—that allows him to claim objectivity for his analyses. We can now see clearly the choice that confronts the stylistician. Either he engages in
an activity that is incoherent in its own terms because its assignment of significances is arbitrary; or he engages in a coherent activity whose terms do not allow him the claims he would like to make for it because the coherence is itself interpretive. In his analysis of Blake’s “The Tyger” Epstein manages to engage in both activities at the same time. He first decides on the meaning of the poem: “‘Tyger’ seems to record a moment of illumination, the moment when the nature of the fundamental energy of the universe became clear. There are, therefore, two aspects of this experience—memory of the sensation of mystic illumination, and awe before the object of perception” (SRA, p. 53). It is no surprise to find the assertion that “both of these aspects are reflected in syntactic structures . . . that communicate this moment with great power to the reader.” Apparently, however, these syntactic structures are not available on the surface, since Epstein finds it necessary to create them.

His strategy illustrates something extremely important about this kind of analysis. When one interrogates a text with a grammar, one populates the text with the entities the grammar is able to recognize, that is, with entities that are a function of the grammar’s categories; and if one of your categories is syntactic ambiguity, the question “is this text ambiguous?” will always be answered in the affirmative. Epstein puts that question to the lines “Tyger, Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night.” The first line, he discovers, can be read as either “The Tyger is burning,” or “The Tyger is bright”; while the second line is ambiguous in several directions. The tyger could be burning or bright against the background of the forests of the night, or in the forests of the night, or within the forests of the night, and the phrase “forests of the night” could be predicating either thickness of the night or darkness of the forest. By the time he has finished, Epstein is able to speak of “this octuply ambiguous expression,” and if we recall that each ambiguity exists in multiple relationships with the other seven, his mathematics are conservative. Now, having created this structure by means of a grammatical apparatus specifically designed to create it, Epstein declares that the information provided in the second, third, and fourth stanzas dissolves it by removing the ambiguities, so that when the first two lines reappear in the final stanza, they are “completely unambiguous,” or in terms more appropriate to the art here being practiced: “Now you see it; now you don’t.”

I find this argument very strange. It asserts that in this last stanza contextual pressures are operating in such a way that the ambiguities noted in the first stanza don’t arise; but those same or other pressures could just as easily have been operating in the first place. That is to say, one could have argued for historical or biographical or other contextual circumstances that would have removed the potential ambiguities of the lines before a reader ever came to them. What is Epstein’s warrant for assuming that lines one and two of the poem are without context (not, in fact, a possible assumption), and are therefore available for an uncon-
strained quarrying for a grammatical apparatus? The question contains its own answer: the assumption of a-contextual circumstances is necessary if Epstein is to be free to "discover" a formal pattern that can stand in an iconic (mimetic) relationship to a sense already selected. In this case the process of fabricating such a pattern is so complicated that one tends to forget (as you may have forgotten) what the preselected sense is. In a triumphant conclusion, Epstein reminds us: "The movement from eightfold syntactic ambiguity to single structure provides syntactic mimesis for the feeling of universal understanding with which the reader finishes the poem" (SRA, p. 67). The sleight of hand is transparent; the movement of the poem is entirely the creation of his analytic strategy; and that in turn is dictated by an interpretation which, rather than being mimed by a formal pattern, produces it. In short, the formal pattern is not there, in the independent sense claimed by the analysis, and even if it were, there would be no exclusive relationship between it and this particular interpretation. The movement from the complex to the simple could mime the change from a questioning of the divine mystery to its unthinking (that is, nonunderstanding) acceptance. Or it could mime an interpretation that Epstein specifically rejects: that the poem is spoken by a limited observer whose attempts to preconceive a reality too complex for him are finally given up. The point is that unless his interpretation is the only one that fits the "formal facts" (and remember that they are not really formal facts in the way he would have them be), the claim of mimesis is empty because there are no formal patterns or interpretations that could not be made into components of a mimetic relationship. In short, everything about this procedure is arbitrary; the interpretation is arbitrary, the formal pattern is arbitrary; the link between them is arbitrary.

Epstein, however, is not yet done, and in the second half of his essay he produces an analysis as compelling in its own terms as this one is bizarre. The subject is still Blake's "Tyger," but the formalism is now speech act theory and the doctrine of illocutionary forces. Epstein distinguishes between yes/no questions, answerable by a simple assent or negation, and questions "to which the answer cannot be 'yes' or 'no' but which must be a phrase, a substitute for an interrogative pronominal, and whose syntactic class is strictly governed by the choice of interrogative pronominal," i.e. where, when, why, what (SRA, p. 70). The questions headed by some of these interrogatives are simple in form—"Where did you go?"—while others are more complex. An example would be "Whose hat is missing?", which assumes a situation previously ordered and understood. (There is a hat and no one has claimed it.) A given question may assume several prior levels of ordered understanding, and thus be a tertiary or even higher question. Such a question always implies that either the questioner or answerer "has already advanced beyond the point of confronting an unordered situation." Epstein finds that in lines like "What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry," Blake
proposes secondary and tertiary questions which are not preceded by the appropriate primary question. The result is “to rob the questions of the power to elicit information of which the questioner is ignorant.” They are “not really questions at all, but disguised exclamations.” The situation of the reader is thus uneasy; he listens to the form of questions, but is aware at some level that they are disguised exclamations, and therefore questions that he cannot even begin to answer. In stanza five, however, the questions are in “perfect canonical form”—“Did he smile his work to see?”—and they come as a great relief because “the construction of an answer can at least begin for them. Thus the ‘true’ questions in stanza five act to release tension previously created by the asking of questions subtly false in form” (SRA, p. 73).

Now one can quarrel with this, but the quarrel would be with the account of the different kinds of questions and their effects on readers; but given that account, Epstein’s conclusions follow. If there is any magic in the sequence, it is at the beginning, where the formal apparatus is introduced. Two points should be made about that apparatus: 1. It isn’t formal in the strictest sense since it contains information about responses and takes into account not only the situation of utterance, but the situations prior to utterance. 2. It is not a finished thing, but is in the process of being constructed. Epstein is forthright about this, noting that he is depending to some extent on rules not yet formulated and labelling his approach, quite properly as “tentative.” These two points will allow us to make a third by way of a question. What would happen if Epstein were to come up with a new formulation of the rules governing questions? One is tempted to answer that the description of the poem would change, but when the categories in dispute are as basic as the structure of questions or the properties of verbs, there is literally nothing to describe. That is, if descriptive categories are themselves interpretive (because they are open to challenge) they are constitutive of their object rather than being faithful (or unfaithful) to it; and when one system of formal rules gives way to another, the result is not a new description of the same poem, but a new poem. Epstein’s analysis of the questions in “The Tyger” is not persuasive because it matches up to the poem, but because it produces the poem: one interpretive structure—a theoretical account of interrogatives—leads inevitably to another—the poem he proceeds to “describe.” There is certainly a coherence to the procedure, but it is a coherence that begins and ends in interpretation, without ever touching base with a fact or a pattern that is independently specifiable.

Another way of putting this is to say that in the more coherent (and therefore more persuasive) of these analyses, the construction of the grammar and the construction of the poem are going on at the same time. Indeed, they are the same activities. This is especially clear in Donald Freeman’s analysis of Keats’s “To Autumn.” Freeman’s exposition is subtle and complex, but basically it is an argument about the verbs “load,”
“bless,” “bend,” “fill,” “swell” and “plump” as they appear in the following lines:

Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells,
With a sweet kernel...

Freeman notes that in the surface structure all of these verbs are transitive, and are to some extent causative, while in their underlying forms “plump” and “swell” are intransitive, and “fill” has at least one intransitive reading. It is possible, he continues, to argue that “load,” “bless,” and “bend” also have underlying intransitive readings. One need only add the suffix “en” to them to see that they denote states in the process of coming about. “Just as the thickened... underlies John thickened the sauce, so does the hazel shells plump[en] underlie to plump the hazel shells,” and similarly with “benden,” “loaden,” and “blessen” (TA, p. 6). Freeman concludes that by embedding these basically inchoative verbs in a surface structure marked “transitive,” Keats achieves an effect basic to the meaning of the poem. The underlying subjects of natural and apparently independent states—the trees which bend, the shells which plump—are made into the objects of Autumn’s all-powerful agency. Rather than the fruit filling with ripeness (where “ripeness” is the answer to the question, “in what manner does the fruit fill?”), the fruit is filled by Autumn, who uses ripeness in the accomplishing of her work. Normally, “with fruit,” “with apples,” “with ripeness,” and “with a sweet kernel” would not be instrumentals, but in this construction they become the means by which Autumn loads, blesses, bends, fills, swells, and plumps. Each of these instrumental phrases, rather than being the result of a verb’s action (the vine is loaded—with what?—with fruit), becomes the object of Autumn’s action (Autumn loads the vines and she loads the vines with fruit.) The overriding agency of Autumn, by making everything her object, makes everything her instrument, even the sun. She conspires with him in the sense of using him; she conspires, and the instrument of her conspiring is him, and the complement of his instrumentality is all the subsidiary instrumental actions: loading, blessing, bending, etc. Thus as instrument, the sun “becomes a part of the objects upon which it is employed (the fruit, the apples, the ripeness, the sweet kernel) just as they in turn become... a part of the objects upon which they are employed as instruments (the vines, the trees, the fruit, the hazel shells.)” “On this reading,” Freeman concludes, “the sun can be seen... as a meta-instrument for Autumn, the ultimate agent of all the natural forces in the poem” (TA, p. 10).

I find this all elegant and persuasive, but it is also interpretive
from the very first word to the last. Like Keyser, Freeman believes otherwise. He sees his reading of “To Autumn” as a demonstration of “syntactic mimesis, imitation by the poem’s syntactic structure of its subject matter” (TA, p. 12); but this is to give himself less credit than he is due. The syntactic structure and the poem’s subject matter are not brought together in the analysis; they are created by the analysis as the building of the one produces an account of the other. Freeman admits as much in a footnote where he attempts to argue that the pattern he discerns represents options chosen by Keats from alternatives in the deep structure. But the enterprise, as he himself says, founders, because linguists disagree about what is in the deep structure, and therefore about what would be alternative derived structures. Nevertheless, he remains convinced that the inchoative-causative pattern in “To Autumn” reflects a preference, although, as he says, a preference over what is a question he cannot answer. The answer is obvious. The preference of one grammar over the other is not the author’s, but the critic’s, and what it reflects in his reading of the poem, a reading which is the very content of his formal categories. The point has been made by J. P. Thorne, who acknowledges that his grammatical analysis of a poem follows rather than precedes his understanding of it, and therefore cannot stand in a relationship of confirmation to that understanding: “The whole point of constructing a grammar [for a poem] . . . is that it provides a way of stating clearly the interpretation that one finds.”

Just so. Freeman’s specifying of the inchoative-causative pattern is not an act preliminary to interpretation; it is itself an interpretive act, and the specifying of the poem’s “subject” matter is nothing more than a transposition of that act into a more discursive and less technical vocabulary. In short, when Freeman chooses one grammar rather than another he is choosing one meaning rather than another and is therefore choosing one poem rather than another. Eugene Kintgen has remarked that given the number of competing grammars and the disputes concerning their basic categories, “two stylistic analyses of the same text written at different times may . . . associate different phenomena, and make apparently different claims about the text.”

I would go even further; the two grammars would be making different texts.

With that statement I come to the end of my argument and can return to its beginning and to my conclusions. There are two varieties of stylistics and neither of them will support the stylisticians’ strongest claims. The one falls apart in the middle because there is no legitimate way (and every illegitimate way) to relate its formal and semantic components; in the other the formal and semantic components are so perfectly related that the distinction between them is lost: its stages are interpretive from the first to the last. The stylisticians often perform these two kinds of analysis without seeing the difference between them, because they remain committed to a form/meaning distinction even when they have in their practice abandoned it. That is, they begin by assuming that a form can
express many meanings and that a meaning can be clothed in many forms, and it is an assumption that they persist in even when demonstrating how much semantic content—how much meaning—their formal categories have. In short, they refuse to acknowledge their dilemma. Either they can continue in an activity that is wholly illegitimate, or engage in an activity which, while legitimate, is not, in the sense they desire, formal. They can still claim rigor and precision, but it will be rigor in the unfolding of an interpretation, and precision in the stating of that interpretation.

Some of you will have noted that this same dilemma is writ larger in the history of transformational grammar. On the one hand there are those who have argued for an independently motivated syntax to which a semantic component must then be added in some ad hoc or artificial way; and on the other, those whose syntactic categories are already so laden with semantic content that the distinction between them finally disappears. The lesson to be drawn from the plight of stylistics is a hard one, especially for those who still dream of a criticism, or even of a linguistics, that begins with free-standing and independent formal facts, and builds up from those facts to the larger world of discourse: the dream, in short, of an analysis that moves in a principled way from the objective description of a text to its interpretation. What I have been saying is that every description is always and already an interpretation, and that therefore the first act of any criticism, and especially of a linguistically based criticism, is to constitute the text.

Finally, I should point out that the argument of this paper differs considerably from that of its predecessor. In “What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?—Part I”, the focus is on the arbitrary relationship between the specification of formal patterns and their subsequent interpretation. Here my thesis is that formal patterns are themselves the products of interpretation and that therefore there is no such thing as a formal pattern, at least in the sense necessary for the practice of stylistics: that is, no pattern that one can observe before interpretation is hazarded, and which therefore can be used to prefer one interpretation to another. The conclusion, however, is not that there are no formal patterns, but that there are always formal patterns; it is just that the formal patterns there always are will always be the product of a prior interpretive act, and therefore will be available for discerning only so long as that act is in force. Or, to end with an aphorism: there always is a formal pattern, but it isn’t always the same one.

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