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The Netherlands

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Brotchie, Eric; Drummond, Hilary

Citation

Brotchie, E., & Drummond, H. (2018). Reading into 'Our Words' : a conversation with David Whitlaw, 4, 11-20.

Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/123127>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

INTERVIEW

READING INTO 'OUR WORDS'

A Conversation with David Whitlaw

Eric Brotchie and **Hilary Drummond**. Universiteit Leiden Book and Digital Media Studies Alumni, 2012–2013.

This article considers the contested nature of reading and readership, and divergent meanings ascribed to texts following publication. It asks three important questions. 1: How does the physical or digital form of text, and the mode of geospatial transmission, influence readership and a given reader's ascription of meaning. 2: Is there any such thing as a misreading of a text? or are all readings of texts valid, regardless of the intended meaning of the author? 3: Can powerful misreadings lead to contested ownership of texts between authors and readers?

*The article takes as its case study Nova Scotian retiree David Whitlaw's passionate reading/misreading of Eric Brotchie's poetic verse *Verba Nostrum: For our teachers*, published in a previous edition of *TXT* magazine (Yapp, 2013). In finding the poem in a printed book 5,000 kilometres from Leiden (and 17,500 kilometres from Eric), David's readership could never have been intended, and his ascription of meaning ever presumed.*

Following an introduction, the article takes the form of an interview conducted with Mr David Whitlaw by Ms Hilary Drummond (BDMS Alumna 2013) in Greenwich, Nova Scotia in January 2018. Audio files (.mp3) of the full interview and David's reading of 'Verba Nostrum' are available for online readers.

Key words: digi-textual authority; literary ownership; poem; textual medium; *TXT*



Not surprisingly, Shakespeare's plays bustle with pedantic schoolmasters... in Love's Labour Lost, [Holofernes] can "smell false Latin" in the clown's confusion of ad unguem and ad dunghill ...

but Shakespeare also assigns great rhetorical skill to characters traditionally denied rhetorical education and the social power it confers.¹

Misreadings are poetic relationships.²

A Canadian and an Australian walk into a bar in Amsterdam...

If the story ended here, dear reader, if for some reason the author was interrupted before they could finish, you couldn't be faulted for anticipating a *punch* line, assuming that it's just a joke. But what if the speaker's intention is misdirection? What if they mimic a conventional style—in this case, a 'so-and-so walks into a bar' gag—in order to deliver an unexpected story? How do your assumptions about textual archetypes and the forms they take affect your understanding and experience of a tale?

Playing with conventions of poetic form in order to divert and amuse is precisely what Eric 'the Australian' Brotchie had in mind when he penned 'Verba Nostrum: For Our Teachers' for the 2013 edition of TXT (then published as *Yapp*). A long-form verse following the dramatic exploits of famous literary characters and written in the style of a classical epic, the poem alludes to the downfall of literature in an era of digi-textual supremacy, and ends with the utter destruction of Leiden's Lipsius Building. While its nostalgic agenda appears clear, the subtext is replete with veiled private references, semi-mythical agents,

and innuendo which could only be apparent to fellow BDMS alumni of that particular academic year. During a wine-fuelled editorial meeting in Amsterdam, Hilary 'the Canadian' Drummond wryly suggested that Eric title his epic doggerel with dog Latin—implying scholarly seriousness where none existed.

Nearly five years after *Yapp's* modest print run was realized, Hilary received a call from her mother, Margaret, who regularly volunteers at a local nursing home in Nova Scotia. One of the elderly residents, David Whitlaw, had read a newspaper article on the topic of book art, and wished to know more. Book art does not mean artisanal work featured in books—illuminated manuscripts, lavish illustrations, and tooled leather jackets, for example—but rather books repurposed by artists to *become new works of art*: books that transcend their original intention as textual 'containers' to become materials for new artistic expression in a different context, resulting in fresh reception by a new audience. *Yapp* happened to feature a list of contemporary book artists as well as an article exploring 'bookwork',³ and David was given a copy to help satisfy his curiosity.

An electronic text is to a book as an avatar is to a body: expressive and operative, yet (currently) limited to two senses: sight and sound. Reading online is a practical yet partial experience, and while the temporary disembodiment of digital communication allows us to disregard material constraints (such as geographical distance), from time to time we must make *things* with our words. Objects, much like people, can end up in unexpected places—with unexpected consequences. David not only read the article about book art; he read *Yapp* from cover to cover. He read about literary protest in the American South, medieval monastic poetry, Europe's last type founder, *prêt-à-porter* libraries, the printing press and the dawn of Humanism in Holland, and the symbolic capital of books. In *Yapp's* final pages, he read 'Verba Nostrum' ['Our Words'], and—much to our initial surprise—took it quite seriously. He read it and reread it, he read it aloud, and he allowed his interpretation to be recorded: first the poem itself, followed by an interview with Hilary and Margaret about the experience.

In finding 'Verba Nostrum' in a book 5000 kilometres from Leiden (and 17,500 kilometres from Eric),

David satisfied the intention of *Yapp's* creators: discovery and enjoyment. In choosing to express the poem orally, with respectful gravity succeeding our original irreverent levity, he built a bridge to further reinterpretation far removed from the ivory tower. Authorship and publishing are creative acts, but the reader also plays an essential role, and can arguably claim 'ownership' of a text through usage. The reader who reanimates long-forgotten words, who breathes life into a silent text by speaking the words aloud, is no less a creator than the poets themselves.

We appreciate that the editors of TXT see the value in this unexpected story, and are providing an opportunity for our words to come full circle. Consider for a moment: Who is around you now? Which voices in the past, present, and future might you be reading into, or reaching out to? An exchange of ideas—a murmuring of discontent, the nectar of the vines—and inevitably the pages begin to fill. At the end of your studies here in Leiden, your words may also make a difference to someone, somewhere.

You never know.



The following interview was recorded on 24 January 2018 at Shannex Blomidon Court in Greenwich, Nova Scotia, Canada. It has been edited for clarity and length.

HILARY DRUMMOND: SO, THIS STORY IS GOING
TO BE PUBLISHED IN TXT MAGAZINE.

David Whitlaw: I'm so surprised. I'm absolutely amazed!

HD: DID YOU HAPPEN TO LOOK UP ANY OF
THE PREVIOUS TXT MAGAZINES?

DW: No, I didn't. That's beyond my technical skills.

HD: I'M SURE THEY ARE AVAILABLE AS PDFS.

DW: I don't know what a PDF is.

HD: BUT YOU KNOW THAT TXT IS A LATER INCARNATION OF *YAPP*.
COULD YOU TELL THE STORY OF HOW WE GOT TO HERE? WE
ARE ALL LOOKING AT THIS FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE.

DW: Don't forget, I'm an old guy who lives in a nursing home. I don't remember everything that's happened over the last few years. Sometimes I have to look things up to refresh my memory.

HD: IN THE CASE OF [THE POEM 'VERBA NOSTRUM' BY
ERIC BROTCHE], HOW DID IT COME TO YOU?

DW: I read an article about people making art out of old books. I mentioned that to [Margaret], and you said, 'My daughter was at university, did a part of her work studying books, literature...' And you brought in [*Yapp*] to show me. There was an article in it about folding books... I'd never heard of book art in my life. I didn't know there was such a thing. At the end of [*Yapp*] there is this poem, and I sat in my room and read it out loud and enjoyed it because I like to read poetry out loud... It's a huge poem, five pages long, and nobody around here would ever take the time to listen to me reading it, so I read it out loud to myself, and then [Margaret] said we could record it.

HD: I WAS SO TICKLED THAT THIS POEM WOULD ENJOY A SECOND LIFE
ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD FROM THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR.

DW: I had to read it more than once to get the references. I didn't understand some of the pronunciations. 'Leeden, Leiden...' I didn't quite follow it at the beginning, and had to go back and read it over

until I understood the characters. It started with two people and ended up with five people in a boat that sank, they were down with the devil, death came with a hood. There were modern references... and it suddenly dawned on me: that's what the poem is all about, the decline of print literature. And at the end, literature is saved, 'Here in Leiden!'

**HD: THE BOOK AND DIGITAL MEDIA STUDIES PROGRAM
SAVED LITERATURE. IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING?**

DW: Exactly! That's right.

**HD: WE'LL BE SURE TO TELL LEIDEN UNIVERSITY
THAT WE SAVED LITERATURE. [LAUGHTER]**

DW: This poem should be on every university course around the world where people are doing advanced studies in literature.

HD: WHY DO YOU THINK THAT?

DW: Because it's valuable. Because it's relevant. The person who wrote this should be recognized for it... That's how it came about. That's my story. I'd never heard of Leiden, but I did recognize most of the characters in the poem.

HD: BECAUSE THEY'RE FROM CLASSICAL LITERATURE?

DW: That's right! Classical and children's literature... Biblical literature as well.

**MARGARET DRUMMOND: THE POEM RECOGNIZES A LONG HISTORY
OF LITERARY TRADITION THAT PREDATES THE DIGITAL AGE.
'FACEBOOK DOESN'T KNOW YOU TWO,' OR WHATEVER THAT LINE IS.**

DW: I love those references. I also like the rhyming scheme, which is irregular, and required reading several times. The first time I read it as rhyming couplets, but it didn't work. I had to pay attention to the rhythm and the punctuation. I enjoyed that.

HD: YOU HAVE SOME EXPERIENCE IN READING OUT LOUD.

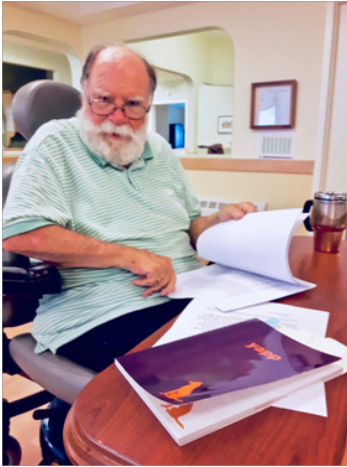
DW: Not as a performer, though I've been around thespians and other theatrical people. I did a bit of amateur radio broadcasting

many years ago.

HD: SO YOU'RE USED TO HAVING MICROPHONES PUSHED IN YOUR FACE. [LAUGHTER]

MD: YOU WERE ALSO A TEACHER FOR THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS.

DW: That's true. Teaching is like acting, to some degree. It's a performance at the front of the room! ... I am very concerned about what I would call 'proper English,' although there's no such thing because I've learned—in my old age—that language is a living thing. It changes, and we don't speak the same as say Chaucer did. It's evolving. That's why it's difficult to read Chaucer.



HD: LANGUAGE CHANGES. DO YOU MEAN SPOKEN LANGUAGE, OR ALSO THE LANGUAGE WE USE WHEN IT'S MEDIATED THROUGH PRINT OR DIGITAL FORMS? YOU'VE SEEN THIS SOCIETAL SHIFT HAPPEN. DO YOU HAVE ANY

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO?

DW: Yes. I don't understand the digital. It took me a long time to understand shortened forms like 'OLL'... no, 'LOL,' 'laugh out loud'... First I just ignored them because they didn't mean anything to me. Then I thought I should at least find out what they mean.

HD: WOULD YOU HAVE BEEN AS INTERESTED IN THE POEM IF IT WAS EXCLUSIVELY AVAILABLE ONLINE? IF I HAD SAID TO [MARGARET], 'MOM, TELL DAVID THAT HE CAN LOOK AT THE PDF OF YAPP ONLINE,' WOULD YOU HAVE DONE IT?

DW: No, I would never have done it.

HD: SO THE MEDIUM OF THE TEXT DID MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR EXPERIENCE OF IT.

DW: It did for me... I don't read online except for emails, or sometimes the news. I never would have read 'Verba Nostrum' online.

HD: I THINK ONE OF THE REASONS THE EDITORS OF TXT MAGAZINE ARE INTERESTED IN THIS STORY IS THIS IDEA OF CHANGE: CHANGE OF EMBODIMENT, CHANGE IN MEANING WHEN YOU CHANGE HOW SOMETHING IS RECEIVED OR DELIVERED. HOW IT IS MADE—WHETHER OF BITS AND BYTES OR PAPER AND INK—DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

DW: Or whether it was originally chiseled on a piece of stone... What about those paintings they've discovered in caves? Who did those? What kind of message were they sending?

HD: SOME THEORIZE THAT PRINT CAN TELL A MORE ENRICHED HISTORY THAN DIGITAL MEDIA BECAUSE ITS PROVIDENCE CAN BE TRACED THROUGH THE HANDS OF SEVERAL DIFFERENT PEOPLE.

DW: I would agree with that, no question. I would agree with that one hundred percent.

HD: YOU NOW OWN A PHYSICAL COPY OF *YAPP*, IS THAT CORRECT?

DW: Yes I do, and I show it to millions of people. [laughter]

HD: WHO KNOWS WHAT RIPPLE EFFECT MIGHT COME FROM THAT?

DW: I like print, but I'm not opposed to digital change. Who's to be opposed? It's happening. People burned down printing presses because they put scribes out of work. The development of the printing press was earthshattering.

HD: THERE IS A PARALLEL STORY HERE: THE SHIFT BETWEEN PRINT AND DIGITAL, AND THE SHIFT FROM THE AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL INTENT TO HOW A READER RECEIVES AND USES TEXT FOR THEIR OWN PURPOSES. WE'VE TOLD YOU THE GENESIS OF THIS POEM, THAT IT WAS AN INSIDE JOKE FOR STUDENTS IN [LEIDEN'S] BOOK AND DIGITAL MEDIA STUDIES CLASS OF 2012–2013.

DW: I can see that, now that you've told me. I didn't know that at the time.

HD: DO YOU THINK THAT THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION MATTERS, OR MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

DW: It doesn't matter to me. When I read it I just see the poem itself.

There are other poems that I might just read and pass on, and don't have that same feeling as I had towards ['Verba Nostrum']: 'Boy, I should read this out loud.'

HD: AS A TEACHER, YOU MUST HAVE TAUGHT LITERATURE...

DW: I worked with the developmentally handicapped for most of my career, so I didn't really teach literature as such.

HD: ...OR ANY TYPES OF STORIES OR TEXTS THAT HAVE BEEN TAKEN UP IN A DIFFERENT CONTEXT, IN A DIFFERENT PLACE, AND TAUGHT OR LEARNED OR CONSUMED MAYBE IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WAY THAN THE AUTHOR INTENDED. DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ABOUT THAT?

DW: I used material quite consciously in a different way than the author had intended because that was expedient to my task at hand. I used it in a way I thought was appropriate to the situation.

HD: IN CRITICAL LITERATURE STUDIES THE INTENT OF THE AUTHOR IS OFTEN A TOPIC OF INQUIRY: 'WHAT DOES THE AUTHOR MEAN BY THIS?'

DW: That's why I never studied literature critically, because that would have spoiled it for me. I'm trying to think of a case where I thought of the intent of the author... Shakespeare's intent was not just to entertain, but to make fun of the aristocracy and other contemporary things of his time.

HD: SHAKESPEARE IS A GOOD EXAMPLE BECAUSE THE AUTHORSHIP IS CONSTANTLY IN QUESTION. SCHOLARS DEBATE IT ENDLESSLY.

DW: Of course! That's right!

HD: AS THE AUTHOR OF THIS POEM, ERIC HAS BEEN ASKING HIMSELF THESE QUESTIONS. HE WROTE THIS TONGUE-IN-CHEEK THING, AND NOW IT HAS BEEN TAKEN QUITE SERIOUSLY BY SOMEONE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD, TO WHOM HE HAS NO CONNECTION.

DW: I didn't erase his authorship entirely from my mind. I thought of what fun he must have had writing it. It's got some good humour in it... many people should read it.

HD: I LOVE THE IDEA OF ALL THOSE STUDENTS READING THIS
LONG IN THE FUTURE, WHEN ERIC NOR I NOR ANY OF US
ARE AROUND TO TELL THE STORY OF HIS INTENTION.

DW: It has as much value as, maybe not Shakespeare, but certainly
as much as Longfellow.

HD: MAYBE THAT IS A FOUNDATIONAL THEORY OF ART: AS AN
ARTIST, WHEN YOU PUT SOMETHING OUT IN THE WORLD,
YOU ALSO RELEASE CONTROL OVER ITS INTERPRETATION.

DW: No question about it, when the painter finishes he puts the
painting away and somebody buys it and it's no longer his painting...

MD: ...AND EVERYBODY WONDERS, WHAT WAS THE
INTENT, WHAT'S HE TRYING TO SAY HERE?

DW: It doesn't matter. It's *that* painting: I will buy it, put it in my
gallery, and look at it.

HD: YOU'RE SAYING IT HAS VALUE...

DW: ...just as a piece of literature has value outside of what the
author intended.

HD: I COULDN'T AGREE MORE. WE CAN ALSO MAKE THE ARGUMENT
THAT THE MEDIUM MADE A DIFFERENCE IN ITS JOURNEY TO YOU.

DW: A great difference. If I hadn't had that book presented to me
in print form, I would never have known that poem... but my life is
enriched having read it!

HD: THAT'S WONDERFUL TO HEAR, ON BEHALF
OF THE EDITORS OF *YAPP*.

MD: NOT JUST THE POEM, BUT THE WHOLE BOOK.

HD: YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE A LOT OF PEOPLE HAPPY.

DW: I'll have to go back and look at the other articles. Yours is the
most difficult. I cannot understand it... If the value of the mark is
determined by the obscurity of the material you could get an A+.

HD: THANK YOU.

DW: It's been fun. I've enjoyed it. Thank you very much, Hilary, for being a student there, and for being a colleague of Eric's, and thank you, Eric, for your contribution. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

To listen to David Whitlaw's reading of 'Verba Nostrum' please visit https://drive.google.com/open?id=1uj_9kxmF0Wlsoty0n3SJa7V1A6pkXs3c or write to hilarydrummond@gmail.com. An unabridged transcript and recording of the full interview are also available upon request. The full text of Eric Brotchie's poem 'Verba Nostrum' can be found at <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/30033>.

Eric Brotchie is a public sector communications specialist from Melbourne, Australia. He is a lover of classical literature, a decent listener, and happy to be slightly famous in Nova Scotia.

Hilary Drummond has worked in the book industry for more than two decades. She is currently a freelance editor, roving bookseller, backyard hen-keeper, and occasional gardener.

Margaret Drummond was born in Montreal. She enrolled at Acadia University in 1969 and worked as a public school educator for 25 years. She enjoys walking her dog, CBC radio, volunteering, chess, and word games.

David Whitlaw was born in Ontario in 1936. His life experiences include community activism, retail merchandising, radio broadcasting, theatre, and a teaching career that spanned 40 years.



¹ R. DeMaria Jr., H. Chang & S. Zacher (eds), *A Companion to British Literature, Volume 2: Early Modern Literature, 1450–1660* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 167.

² R. Ingelbien, *Misreading England: Poetry and Nationhood since the Second World War* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 231.

³ G. Dumitrică, "Reminiscences: A Brief Introduction to 'Bookwork,'" *Yapp 1* (2013): 32–36. The featured book artists included Cara Barer, Brian Dettmer, Matej Krén, Wim Botha, Evy Jokhova, and Pablo Lehmann, among others.