

Florida State University Libraries

Faculty Publications

The Department of English

2011

How to Not Read a Victorian Novel

Paul Fyfe



How to Not Read a Victorian Novel

‘Looking at a book in pieces is harder than dissecting a human body.’
— senior undergraduate English major

In the humanities, we do not teach the answers. Rather, we teach students how to ask good questions. This simple goal has been so ubiquitous in my experience as a student and teacher of English as to become an article of pedagogical faith. Call it the ‘interrogative stance’ of our discipline, or the legacy of constructivism, or just a proven way of getting students to explore the plurality of interpretive possibilities of texts and contexts.¹ For any discipline which guides students toward generating their own arguments, it makes sense to start with questions. But it is also hard to do. How do you teach questions? If many students anticipate learning answers from their instruction, how do you convey the satisfaction in critical questioning? How do you teach students not only to accept a condition of not knowing, but to readily embrace it as the most generative grounds of inquiry? A cynic might call this professing ignorance. And that is exactly right.

You could take this back to Socrates. Start from a position of informed ignorance, ask questions and have a discussion. It happens all the time in seminars; in-class discussion continues to be one of our primary tools in a pedagogy of questioning. But new tools have emerged that can re-introduce us to ignorance in surprising ways. These tools are built from digital technologies, and they facilitate thinking about digital pedagogy in all the generative ways scholars have considered the digital humanities (realms which are never so distinct). As Jerome McGann has described the *Rossetti Archive*, it is a tool for ‘imagining what we don’t know.’² The archive puts us in a different relation to knowledge, which McGann and others have extrapolated as the most promising opportunity of the digital humanities—it makes us ask new questions.

The digital thus offers a terrific platform for pursuing a familiar pedagogical goal. But it takes the ‘interrogative stance’ one step further: in this domain, instructors have fewer answers. In a conventional seminar, an instructor might lean toward acceptable methods and correct interpretations (or, at least, ‘not incorrect’ ones). In the realm of digital pedagogy, it’s all potentially up for grabs: methods, tools, and the social dynamics of instruction. This can be as unsettling for the teacher as for the student. It can also be a terrific opportunity to join students in shared projects of inquiry and explore new aspects of the discipline. We just need to imagine a pedagogy that transforms the uncertainties of the digital realm into the domain of questions. We need a pedagogy of digital experimentation to match what Stephen Ramsay calls ‘the hermeneutics of screwing around’:

It is rather to ask whether we are ready to accept surfing and stumbling—screwing around, broadly understood—as a research methodology. For to do so would be to countenance the irrefragable complexities of what ‘no one really knows.’ Could we imagine a world in which

‘Here is an ordered list of the books you should read,’ gives way to, ‘Here is what I found. What did you find?’³

Ramsay senses the unique interrogative potentials of the digital for the humanities (and vice versa). He also provocatively melds ‘methodology’ and ‘screwing around’ as the best approach to the ‘irrefragable complexities’ of our discipline. His is a hermeneutics of experiment or play. What might that look like in the classroom? What follows is one example that I tried, adapted from the wonderfully creative Jason Jones.⁴ As with most games, it helps to start with a few guidelines, if only to break and rewrite them along the way.

My students were assigned to write a paper on a book they’ve never read. The exercise was called ‘How to Not Read a Victorian Novel,’ with emphasis on the ‘not reading.’ This is the phrase Franco Moretti happily couples to his notion of ‘distant reading’: the extensive survey of lots and lots of books, rather than an intensive reading of a select and ultimately unrepresentative few.⁵ My exercise differed in that students were assigned to ‘distant read’ one large book rather than an entire library. The goal was not a higher order of representativeness of the Victorian novel, as Moretti might seek. Rather, the goal was to defamiliarize students with a textual object whose structures of coherence we often take for granted or cannot easily perceive. The goal was productive disorientation, to accept distance as ‘a condition of knowledge’ that gives rise to new kinds of questions.

Moretti’s originally analog project to ‘distant read’ lends itself nicely to digital techniques such as data mining, text analysis and visualisations. Some of those techniques are now quite accessible; you need only be able to capably navigate a few Internet sites and manage a text file to have a beginner’s home laboratory for text analysis. My paper assignment was basically a lab report. (That was disorienting enough for senior undergraduate English majors.) Here are the instructions:

- 1) Choose a text. I gave students a list of Victorian novels and asked them to choose one they had never read. The exercise would work for any long electronic text students can access, but the Victorian novel has certain advantages: it is in the public domain, it is often long, and it exemplifies a genre about which students probably have opinions already. A given list of titles isn’t necessary, but it simplified the process and—having listed texts I’d read—provided an angle on what students eventually came up with. In retrospect, the exercise could have run just as well without the instructor having read the books at all.
- 2) Make a text file. Find and download a plain text (.txt) version of the novel from Project Gutenberg <<http://gutenberg.org>>—again for simplicity’s sake. There are abundant bibliographical questions this exercise ignores—but which it could just as easily call students attention to, depending on how the exercise is designed. Save the file to a computer. Open it and quickly delete all the extra stuff (technical header, legalese, etc.) that is not the novel proper. Save it again, making sure it remains a plain text (.txt) file. Remind students they are not to read the novel, but to ‘not read’ it with the following tools.

- 3) Make word clouds. When provided with a bunch of text, tag cloud or word cloud engines will return a graphical representation of the most common words: the more frequently a word appears in the text, the larger it appears relative to other words on the screen. We used *Wordle* <<http://wordle.net>> and *TagCrowd* <<http://tagcrowd.com>>. These sites will also let you manipulate ‘stop words’ or excluded words and also change the display. Students were asked to generate clouds for the whole text, then to break the book into chapters or sections and try those in sequence, and then to play with exclusions.
- 4) Run text analysis recipes. The online *Text Analysis Portal for Research*, or *TAPoR* <<http://taporware.ualberta.ca/>>, makes freely available a suite of simple text analysis tools, including word frequency, concordance, collocates, and more. *TAPoR* also provides a set of ‘recipes’ for the novice text analyser. Students were asked to conduct selected exercises on their own texts, and then to tweak the settings and experiment further.
- 5) Ruminare. What insights, if any, do these tools provide? What kinds of words appear in clouds? Are there patterns or in/consistencies? How might you ‘read’ groups of words? With the text analysis software, what keywords or patterns did you pursue and why? What have you learned (and not learned) about your book? What do you think are the values / limitations of ‘not reading’ this way? Upon what logics are these tools premised, and what might that suggest about ‘close’ reading? Where might it be useful in future research projects or in analysing other kinds of texts?
- 6) Write a paper. Students wrote about what they did and what they learned, with emphasis on the latter: what they learned about their chosen text, and about this kind of ‘distant reading.’ They could include charts or pictures or screenshots. I told them to not worry about a central argument, but it was fine if they developed one. The goal was active thinking about what kinds of knowledge a distant reading can or cannot produce. A good paper can have lots of unanswered questions, I reminded them. Good questions are evidence of thoughtfulness.

This exercise was new to the students. So were the technologies and interfaces. The paper required thinking about texts in a very different way than students were used to. There were dead ends; on the other hand, there were no wrong answers. I urged students to start early, to ask for guidance, to screw around, and to scrutinize any moment of frustration as instead an opportunity to change the kinds of questions they were asking. And it worked. As one student summarized, ‘Attempting to interpret this novel at a distance using text analysis tools has probably been one of the most interesting, perplexing, frustrating, yet strangely satisfying things I have yet had to do for school.’ Another wrote that ‘the experience of using these analytical tools did allow me to visualise the text in an entirely different way. They gave me an even greater appreciation for the structural challenges presented to authors, as well as granted me a clearer understanding of the intricate frame upon which many Victorian novels are built.’

Students were initially bemused and even skeptical. Those who associated ‘screwing around’ with ‘not thinking,’ or who might have welcomed ‘not reading’ as either a holiday or a shortcut

to the answers, quickly discovered the opposite. As one student said, ‘once I began the project, I realized it was actually much more time consuming and extensive than a typical research paper.’ Another student confessed that ‘I was extremely unsure of the purpose of this assignment until I tried to cut corners.’ For this person, the ‘purpose’ revealed itself through the work: through the trials, errors, experiments, and insights it required each student to undertake, but also to actively invent. We know how these tools work, but how do we use them? Students started to imagine their own methods on the fly. One student reflected, ‘The amount of information can truly be overwhelming, and a large part of the success of this exercise seems to lie in not only how to use the tools to the best advantage, but identifying the most helpful words and avoiding dead-ends.’ Students had to rationalize their decisions, which called attention to interpretive method itself, however traditional, elaborate, arbitrary, creative, or effective. One student set up a timer to structure her reading of sequential word clouds. Another whipped up a perfect storm of hundreds of them, then scrolled through at a pace impossible to read but which encouraged some fascinating intellectual processing. He reported a near psychedelic experience about *The Prime Minister*.

Screwing around with methods led to different sets of questions. Students initially looking for these tools to provide a study guide for character, theme, and plot hit dead ends, and at those moments, realized they needed to ‘not read’ in a different way. A student working on *Dracula* used *TAPoR*’s ‘comparator’ tool to reveal the symmetry of the first and final chapters, and then considered their remaining differences to sketch an interpretation. A student working on *The Moonstone* found a set of conspicuous words including ‘house,’ ‘room,’ and ‘man,’ and another set including ‘diamond,’ ‘Sergeant,’ ‘London,’ and ‘Indians.’ Suspecting that the first set related to the Victorian domestic novel, she proposed that *The Moonstone* inflects these generic expectations with something newly present on the international or colonial horizon. Another student working on *A Tale of Two Cities* figured out some themes of revolution, fear, and hope, but was puzzled what to do with the group of words ‘hands,’ ‘head,’ ‘face,’ ‘eyes,’ and ‘hair.’ After failing to reconstruct much plot, he figured that text analysis tools are better at revealing literary elements constituted by smaller clusters of words and their evolving patterns such as metaphor. He then speculated that Dickens might embody the thematics of the novel itself, making revolution and fear and hope palpable, or transforming these abstractions into things to be seen, touched, experienced, related in a human being.

Other students usefully questioned the analysis tools themselves. One student (not reading *Jane Eyre*) felt uncomfortable about privileging mere word frequency with so much interpretive value, so she began by considering infrequent words, and then words not present at all. How does a novel represent what cannot be said, or who cannot speak? And, turning to these tools, what patterns in words and phrase might supplement all that the novel does not actually say? Another student questioned the very politics of search. Stumbling upon the ‘lyricism of the dialects’ in *Jude the Obscure*, this student worried that non-standard English might present a unique problem for the rude pattern-matching of most search engines. She suspected that a ‘distant reading’ based on given character strings (i.e. words) risks obscuring the syntax and dialect of underrepresented people and places—what Hardy’s novel, she guessed, was probably attempting to correct.

This is what screwing around can look like. Not every paper was as successful in generating insights, but every paper generated an awareness of its own questioning. ‘I find it interesting that something can both answer and create so many questions,’ one student wrote. Students did learn about the Victorian novel, and they also did *not* learn, in that we had so many questions to share and further discuss. Several students committed to reading (‘not not reading’) their chosen novels over the summer. And I have never enjoyed grading papers so much. Ultimately, this exercise is a means to an end: teaching students to ask good questions and to embrace the interrogative as a condition of knowledge. Digital pedagogy complements and complicates this familiar goal, as students are freed to imagine what they don’t know and encouraged to invent and interrogate their own methods of finding out.

Paul Fyfe
Florida State University

Acknowledgements: special thanks to Jason Jones of Central Connecticut State University and to the students in the spring 2010 Senior Seminar on Victorian Telecommunication (ENG 4934-02) at Florida State University.

¹ Janet Donald, *Learning to Think: Disciplinary Perspectives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 259.

² Jerome McGann, ‘Imagining What We Don’t Know: The Theoretical Goals of the *Rossetti Archive*’ (1997) <<http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/jjm2f/old/chum.html>> [accessed 17 September 2010].

³ Stephen Ramsay, ‘The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books’, unpublished presentation delivered at Brown University, Providence, RI, 17 April 2010. <<http://www.playingwithhistory.com/wpcontent/uploads/2010/04/hermeneutics.pdf>> [accessed 20 April 2010].

⁴ Jason Jones, ‘How to Notice Things in an English Class: Word Clouds’ and ‘How to Read 3 Victorian Novels in 2.5 Hours’, *The Salt-Box* (2 September 2008 and 27 March 2008) <<http://www.jbj.wordherders.net/>> [accessed September 2008].

⁵ Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature,’ *New Left Review*, 1 (2000) <<http://www.newleftreview.org/A2094>> [accessed 19 May 2010].