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## SHOWING THE WORK OF READING

Despite the prevalence in literary study of the technique called "close reading," there is, even today, no real consensus about its constituent features. Peter Middleton offers a typical characterization of close reading as "a heterogeneous and largely unorganized set of practices and assumptions."<sup>63</sup> The mode of reading that survived the decline of New Criticism was and is, in the terms of my analysis, a minimally formalized technique. Close reading never acquired the procedural formality of other scholarly practices, such as *explication de texte* or textual editing. This is the reason scholars of the postwar period looked back uneasily on what they took to be the formal basis of their practice, which seemed to be at once methodical and yet too loosely codified. For this reason, too, even as close reading facilitated the integration of sophisticated new theoretical schemas into scholarship, it was relegated as a discrete practice to the introductory level of literary study.

Whatever name we give it, a technique of reading permanently transformed literary study during the interwar period. We might identify this transformation with the movement

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called New Criticism, but I believe it can be understood in a deeper sense as a moment in which the reading of literature was problematized across the Anglo-American system. Without doubt this event was a response to the massification of literacy, ongoing since the nineteenth century. In his 1939 essay, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Walter Benjamin offers a pithy statement of this new condition: "The crowd—no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth-century writers. It was getting ready to take shape as a public in broad strata who had acquired facility in reading."<sup>64</sup> The emergence in the twentieth century of cultural works in new media forms such as film, radio, and television generated further anxiety, exacerbating a tendency toward declinist narratives.<sup>65</sup> Literary critics were forced to confront the rarity of literature as one form of writing among many in the modern world, and writing as one medium among many. This engagement was equally urgent in modernist writing itself, which was everywhere marked by an ambivalent struggle with mass media, including the forms of mass or popular writing.<sup>66</sup>

64. Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1973), 120.

65. The massification of literacy inevitably appeared to contemporary observers as a decline in reading skills and led to regular social panics. For an account of this phenomenon, see Johns, *The Science of Reading*, 191–200. Assertions of decline in the general level of culture were ubiquitous during this period. For the most serious study of its time, see Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939).

66. The emergence by the end of the nineteenth century of popular forms such as the "penny dreadfuls" and "shilling shockers" was a condition for modernist reaction, as scholars have long recognized. The full emergence of "genre" forms of writing—detective fiction, romance—further complicated the circumstances for the recognition of "serious" literature. For a classic study of the split between high and low cultural forms, which gave rise to the modern

Glancing briefly one last time at I. A. Richards's work of the 1920s, let us recall that Richards's task was to persuade his peers that the reading of literature was a problem, that its success had been taken for granted: "we discover what a comparatively relaxed and inattentive activity our reading of established poetry is."<sup>67</sup> His experiment in *Practical Criticism* disclosed a failure in the transmission of reading as technique: "A better technique, as we learn daily in other fields, may yield results that the most whole-hearted efforts fall short if misapplied. And the technique of the approach to poetry has not yet received half so much serious systematic study as the technique of pole-jumping. If it is easy to push up the general level of performance in such 'natural' activities as running or jumping . . . merely by making a little careful inquiry into the best methods, surely there is reason to expect that investigation into the technique of reading may have even happier results" (291–292). The invocation of "pole jumping" tells us that Richards had a precise understanding of technique. In the famous protocol experiment, he discovered that his students were failing at a basic level of technique: comprehension, or the technique of "construing." Conceding the objections raised to Richards's experiment, his analysis of technical failure appears to me confirmed by generations of teachers thereafter. Recognizing the difficulty of comprehending literary texts, a difficulty intrinsic to their literariness, was a necessary condition for the emergence of that technique we name now as close reading. Beyond the lecture hall, the condition of failure was a fact of reading as a mass

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avant-garde, see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987).

67. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 297.

practice.<sup>68</sup> Richards was not training future literary critics to write literary criticism. The protocols were not intended as exercises in writing but as a means of *evincing* reading, of making it visible, and potentially capable of improvement.

Richards brought his technique of reading only so far as a propaedeutic, a therapeutic exercise. It was further developed and transmitted by his successors as a disciplinary mode of reading. And yet, it has been difficult to give this technique greater specificity in its dissemination than "attention to the words on the page." In this formulation, "attention" names a requisite for close reading, but no particular procedure of analysis. "Attention" here refers to the focus of the sensory and cognitive systems on a singular

68. Richards's identification of an array of interferences with reading, of which the "stock response" was representative, might be seen as a rearguard response to mass literacy, which is far more internally differentiated than polemics of the time suggest. It would require a separate (and potentially vast) inquiry to account for divergent modes of reading after the achievement of near-universal literacy, obviously not my purpose here. I mean only to suggest that it would be a mistake to dismiss Richards's response as simply reactive. It might be possible to update his terminology, for example, by translating notions such as "stock response" into information theory as the equivalent of "noise." Noise is present in every communication, at the least as the annunciator of the channel itself, the medium. In his famous protocol experiment, Richards attempted to foreclose noise by anonymizing the poems, but this strategy had the opposite effect of driving his readers to open the noisy channels of their response even wider, in a desperate attempt to find a ground for their impressions. Today we are disposed to acknowledge that noise can be recuperated as meaningful in interpretation, where it can appear in the guise of "ambiguity" (as in Empson's practice) or "context" (as with New Historicism and related methodologies). For a prescient effort to incorporate information theory into critical practice, see William R. Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

object. This heightened state indicates only the possibility of technique, not its actualization. I shall comment at the end of this essay on the question of attention; the question of minimal formality raises a more immediate theoretical problem. We will have to give an account of this feature if, as I propose, it was just this aspect of the technique that ensured its survival beyond the hegemony of the New Criticism. In fact, close reading had to be recollected in later decades as a technique far more rigidly prescribed than it actually was *in order to repudiate it*.

It will be helpful to approach the question of close reading as technique by way of a later attempt to pin it down to an itemized prescription. I cite here Vincent Leitch's effort in his *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties*, published in 1988:

In performing a close reading, a New Critic would generally:

- (1) select a short text, often a metaphysical or modern poem;
- (2) rule out "genetic" critical approaches;
- (3) avoid "receptionist" inquiry;
- (4) assume the text to be an autonomous, ahistorical, spatial object;
- (5) presuppose the text to be *both* intricate and complex *and* efficient and unified;
- (6) carry out multiple retrospective readings;
- (7) conceive each text as a drama of conflicting forces;
- (8) focus continually on the text and its manifold semantic and rhetorical interrelations;
- (9) insist on the fundamentally metaphorical and therefore miraculous powers of literary language;

- (10) eschew paraphrase and summary or make clear that such statements are not equivalent to poetic meaning;
- (11) seek an overall balanced or unified comprehensive structure of harmonized textual elements;
- (12) subordinate incongruities and conflicts;
- (13) see paradox, ambiguity, and irony as subduing divergences and insuring unifying structure;
- (14) treat (intrinsic) meaning as just one element of structure;
- (15) note in passing cognitive, experiential dimensions of the text; and
- (16) try to be the ideal reader and create the one, true reading, which subsumes multiple readings.<sup>69</sup>

Leitch's checklist is suffused with an irony meant to relegate close reading to a pretheoretical past. The sixteen prescriptive items follow closely the method of Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn*, combined with the principles articulated by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their unavoidable essays on the "intentional" and "affective" fallacies. To what extent did the protocols Leitch enumerates actually dominate critical practice in the heyday of the New Criticism?

69. Vincent Leitch, *American Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 35. In a later work, *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century: Theory Renaissance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), Leitch reduces his list from sixteen to ten items (39). He also pushes back against the reaffirmation of close reading, which he sees as implying a repudiation of theory and cultural studies (40–41).

In Leitch's account, a close reading is performed according to a set of rules—and quite a few of them! But we stumble already on the first of these rules. It is likely that the new technique of reading literary works would scarcely have endured had it been restricted to the reading of the "metaphysical or modern poem." In *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks tries to preempt the perception of limited application by extending his method to poems from all the major periods of English literature (the tactic also of *Understanding Poetry*). Had this extension failed, close reading would have disappeared quickly from the critical scene. I will not address most of the other items on Leitch's list except to suggest that these injunctions might or might not govern subsequent exercises in New Critical reading, and further, that the force of these injunctions weakened in succeeding decades.

There is one feature of close reading, however, only implicit in Leitch's recipe, that is worth singling out for its enduring effects, and that is the modeling function of the lyric poem. If the concept of the "poem" circulated in New Critical theory as a metonym for literature, it paradoxically authorized the extension of close reading to other forms of literature by constructing passages from these works as ontologically *like* poems.<sup>70</sup> This was perhaps a questionable construction, but it helped to establish literature as a defined object within the evolving disciplinary system by grounding the ontology of literature in its presumptively most prestigious form. The tactic of analogizing all literary works to

70. In the case of lyric poems themselves, as Leitch observes, the poem was often analogized to a drama. The prevalence of this tactic suggests that the point was in part the analogy itself, which jolted reading into a higher state of attention by dislocating the generic frame.

poems had surprising curricular consequences: it paradoxically secured the place of novels as canonical literary works and objects worthy of close textual study. The New Criticism launched thousands of “readings” of novels by way of reading passages from them. How many interpretations of James, Melville, Woolf, and so many others were produced in the postwar period, all generated by close reading of passages? Close reading vastly increased the productivity of scholarship; that effect was enabled not by its programmatic features so much as by its minimal formality, signaled by its approach to any literary work, or even any passage from that work, as like its approach to the lyric poem.<sup>71</sup>

If close reading succeeded as a relatively informal technique, we might begin to isolate its disseminated form by paring away most of the items enumerated by Leitch. What remains? I will attempt to characterize this remainder by recalling an argument advanced by W. K. Wimsatt in an essay entitled “Explication as Criticism,” delivered at the English Institute proceedings of 1951.<sup>72</sup> Attempting to define a technique of reading prevalent among his New Critical peers, Wimsatt identifies this practice at first as “explication,” a word that suggests a mode of reading that is relatively modest by comparison to what we usually mean by interpretation. The fact that Wimsatt draws an implicit distinction between explication and the more elaborated practice of

71. I note here a relatively unexplored theoretical problem related to the function of the quoted passage in the close reading of prose works. Passages obviously have a synecdochic function in this context, but they also constitute quasi-unities in themselves, inviting formal analogy to a lyric poem.

72. W. K. Wimsatt, “Explication as Criticism,” in *Explication as Criticism: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1941–1952*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 2–26.

interpretation seems to me crucial, justifying my hypothesis that close reading was indeed a minimalist technique. But the word “explication,” as a possible name for this practice, presents Wimsatt with difficulties, first of all the problem of the relation between explication and *judgment*, or criticism as it was traditionally defined. This is not the question, Wimsatt writes, of “whether it is necessary to understand a poem in order to criticize it”—this is too obvious to need demonstration—but the more puzzling problem of “whether to understand a poem is the same as to criticize it” (1). Richards, we recall, was confident that “comprehension” did indeed do most of the work of judgment, but Wimsatt wants to submit this assumption to scrutiny.<sup>73</sup> Writing two decades on from *Practical Criticism*, Wimsatt surveys the critical field and wonders, with surprise, why no one has offered to describe or define the technique that seemed somehow to enact a judgment of the work in the very process of expressing an understanding of it. Interestingly, Wimsatt does not advert to the concept of “close reading.” Is the proper name of this technique, then, “explication”? Well, not quite.

“Explication,” as Wimsatt employs this term, is more or less equivalent to Richards’s sense of “comprehension,” the construing of meaning at the level of words, phrases, lines, and sentences that might then be scaled up to the whole work. Explication’s domain of practice raises the further question of relation to its French cognate, *explication de texte*, which Wimsatt worriedly considers: “It is not clear to me, indeed, that Dryden, in providing a motto

73. Richards, *Practical Criticism*: “good reading, in the end, is the whole secret of ‘good judgment’” (287).

for the organ of our guild—‘The last verse is not yet sufficiently explicated’—had in mind more than the explication of the explicit. But the expicator will surely not conceive that he has employed his talent unless he performs not only that service (as in glosses and other linguistic and historical observations) but also the explication of the implicit. For poetry is never, or even mainly, ‘poetry of statement’ (3). If explication means bringing a certain amount of learning to our reading of a literary text, this does not, in Wimsatt’s view, constitute an act of criticism. Thus far, he is saying nothing more than what Brooks contended in his polemic against “paraphrase,” the equivalent of what Wimsatt cites as “poetry of statement.” Wimsatt goes on, then, to disambiguate explication from *explication de texte* (“glosses and other linguistic and historical observations”) by introducing a variant concept: *explicitation*. The novel concept of “explication” hints more emphatically at a *process of reading*, an effort to make this process more visible. A further distinction between the “explicit” and the “implicit”—“those two sides of the explicable”—aims to grasp a technique of reading that in its very process implies an act of judgment, what Wimsatt calls “evaluation through explication” (3). I have already suggested that the new technique of reading did indeed routinely perform this function. It is possible now to demonstrate how this happens, even while observing that this judicial function lapsed over time.

Having asserted the performative identity of explicitation and judgment, Wimsatt offers a theoretical argument in support of that equation: “any theory of poetry” will regard “the poem as an organized whole—a wholeness of vision, that is, established through wholeness of diverse, but reconciled, parts” (2). The process of explicitating brings out the relation

of the part to the whole, an implicit relation that does not wait for an interpretation of the whole work in order to impute meaning to elements of the text, that is, to comprehend these elements. It is the very possibility of explicating the trajectory from a part to the whole that confirms the literary work as a whole.

Wimsatt's holistic language, enacting a version of the "hermeneutic circle," sounds archaic to our ears. It represents an effort to force a theoretical break with the hegemony of historical scholarship, which is demoted to the "explication of the explicit," the technique extending back from *explication de texte* to its ancient origins in the commentary tradition.<sup>74</sup> That technique was once content with explicating small segments of text, without positing an interpretation of the whole work (though such an interpretation was not excluded). In order to see where the alternative technique of explication leads, it will be necessary to wrest Wimsatt's notion from his theoretical holism. This holism falls right away into a quandary, because, as Wimsatt acknowledges, literary works can manifest aspects of holistic integrity at virtually every level—from phrases to lines of poetry, to stanzas, paragraphs, scenes or acts in dramas, chapters in novels, and so forth. These terms name conventional structural divisions, and they can exhibit unities of various kinds; but they are not the only structures that constitute resonant meanings that can be "explicated" in the technique Wimsatt projects. These other resonant features have no name; neither are they necessarily coterminous with the work. They might govern portions of text smaller

74. René Wellek confirms the distinction in "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra," *Critical Inquiry* 4.4 (Summer 1978): "it is a mistake to consider close reading a new version of *explication de texte*" (620).

than the work or larger, on up to oeuvres and genres. Later, they will be recognized as *networks* or *patterns* of words, images, themes, syntactic structures, figures, descriptive details, narrative scenarios . . . the possibilities are innumerable.

Wimsatt's holism, like the organicism of the New Critics generally, compelled him to identify the connections he discerned between "parts" of a work as evidence of the unity of the work; but this was an unnecessary hypothesis. *Close reading eventually liberated itself from the fetishization of the organic whole, a process that coincided with the recession of the lyric poem as the model object of criticism.* Critics later find Wimsatt's implicit relations wherever they look for them—not surprisingly, because networks really exist and traverse literature at every level from individual works to oeuvres to genres to massive textual corpora. Versions of this quest for resonant singularities will support the vast productivity of literary criticism in the decades to follow, up to and including the patterns detected by data-mining programs.<sup>75</sup>

75. Patterns in texts do not interpret themselves, even when the observation of pattern sets out from the work of close reading. For a discussion of "pattern recognition" across the span from close reading to digital analysis, see Hoyt Long and Richard Jean So, "Literary Pattern Recognition: Modernism between Close Reading and Machine Learning," *Critical Inquiry* 42.2 (Winter 2016): 235–267. See also Ted Underwood, *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019): "Moreover, quantitative models still have to be interpreted, and the interpretation of literary models will depend to some extent on attentive reading of particular works and passages" (209). The distinction between "close" and "distant" reading has often been correlated with the distinction between qualitative and quantitative, but this is an imperfect alignment. Quantitative analysis can be undertaken for individual works, even very brief poems or short stories. It functions in these contexts as close reading. An early example of such a technique was developed by Edith Rickert in her nearly forgotten *New Methods for the Study*

If the New Critics' metaphysical belief in organic unity became more or less optional, and later even an embarrassment, the core procedure Wimsatt describes as "explication" became the practical basis for raising reading to a new level of technique. Explication is not interpretation, but the name for a technique of reading that makes *an account of the reading process the basis for interpretation*. Very simply, explication is a showing of the work of reading.<sup>76</sup> It puts pressure on the moment of reading when the comprehension of a text's elemental features turns, or struggles to turn, toward the correlation of those features with larger structures of meaning. The explicitation of what is implicit constitutes an infrastructure for interpretation. This structure is exposed, in the way that modernist architects expose the infrastructure of their buildings. In practical terms, this means that close reading can be exhibited, that it is not identical only to the solitary exercise of reading carefully or slowly.

Close reading, then, does not imply any particular mode of interpretation or grander agenda of criticism. The hermeneutic tradition, with all its interpretive schemes, flows

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of Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927). Her work has been happily brought back into the history of criticism by Buurma and Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive*, 88–106. For an inquiry into early quantitative criticism, see Yohei Igarashi, "Statistical Analysis at the Birth of Close Reading," *New Literary History* 46.3 (Summer 2015): 485–504.

76. This borrowing from mathematics gestures toward the technicity of close reading, which, as we have seen, struck its contemporaries at first as an imitation of scientific method. Close readings are not, of course, "proofs" in the mathematical or scientific sense, but exhibitions of a methodical mode of reading. Anirudh Sridhar, Mir Ali Hosseini, and Derek Attridge, eds., *The Work of Reading: Literary Criticism in the 21st Century* (Cham, Switz.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), gestures in its title to the direction pursued here. For other examples of this phrase in recent use, see Newstok "Archive."

like a jet stream far above close reading's groundwork.<sup>77</sup> For this reason, close readings of a text can yield different and even contradictory interpretations.<sup>78</sup> This is sometimes difficult to see, because in the writing of criticism, showing the work of reading can be integrated almost seamlessly into interpretive argument. The emphasis must be placed, however, on the qualifier *almost*: the work of reading has to remain visible within interpretation, as its provocation; otherwise, the performative impact of close reading will be blunted and its evidentiary value lost. Conversely, close reading does not guarantee validity in interpretation; rather, it opens interpretation to inspection and contestation by other readers.

We might be tempted to say of "showing the work of reading," "Is that all?" Yes, that *is* all. I will go further and

77. An early example: Johann Gottfried Herder's essay of 1773, *Shakespeare*, trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), a founding document in the history of hermeneutics, contains no close textual analysis at all.

78. The same fluidity obtains for the expression of style in close reading, its capacity to enable individuating writing effects. Close reading as technique served the idiosyncratic style of Empson just as well as it served the impersonal style of Wimsatt. On the relation between close reading and style, see D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 57–58. Miller sees the relation between the narrator and the character whose thoughts are disclosed in free indirect style as restaging a contradiction in the close reader's relation to the text: on the one hand, a bid for mastery over the text, even to the point of overwriting it with the reader's own words, and on the other, a self-abjecting submission to the words of the text. Miller's meditation on the closeness of close reading opens the trope to senses not demanded by the ordinary practice of disciplinary reading, but not excluded by it either. For further discussion of this issue, see Frances Ferguson, "Now It's Personal: D. A. Miller and Too-Close Reading," *Critical Inquiry* 41.3 (Spring 2015): 521–540.

say that literary scholars already know what close reading is—that it is just the procedure I describe. I have added nothing to that practical knowledge. But when we come to conceptualize close reading, to define it, we feel compelled to burden it with unnecessary descriptors and qualifications as well as ideological entailments. With regard to the last-named, close reading as a technique has no ideological or political implications whatsoever. This conclusion follows from the very nature of technique. A technique such as riding a bicycle or swimming—like reading itself—has no political implication *as technique*. On the other hand, the *distribution* of techniques almost always has political causes and consequences, perhaps none more significant historically than the distribution of literacy. Close reading, as an art cultivated by a fraction of the college-educated population, is unequally distributed too. Unfortunately, the distinction between technique and its political context has perplexed the history of close reading since its inception, a confusion it should be possible now to clarify.<sup>79</sup> At the least, we might argue that better

79. For some historians of the discipline, the political commitments of several New Critics—unquestionably racist and stridently anticommunist—are inextricable from the technique of close reading and are transmitted along with that technique. For a recent version of this argument, see Andy Hines, *Outside Literary Studies: Black Criticism and the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022). Hines is right about the political convictions of some New Critics, and he is also right that these beliefs may be implicit in their interpretations of literary works. I have made a similar argument in earlier work on conservative structures of thought in New Critical interpretations such as those in Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn*. See *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 134–175. For a nuanced account of New Critical political positions, see Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Jancovich is interested particularly

close reading serves the purpose of critique, and that it would be unwise to deprive critique of this tool.

We find it difficult to believe that close reading is so minimal a procedure as I am proposing here, not because we do not know how to do it, but because we misunderstand its nature as technique. We misunderstand the constitutive minimalism of technique. At the same time, “showing the work of reading” is more than paying attention to the words on the page. Close reading is a minimal but not a simple procedure. At the least, close reading requires reflection—or, to employ

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in the anticapitalism of the first generation of New Critics—Ransom, Tate, and Warren. This position owed much, of course, to the romantic medievalism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The New Critics’ critique of industrial capitalism might be read out of context as surprisingly progressive, though it was based on an agrarianism uncritical of its implication in the racism of the US South. (Warren repudiated his earlier position on race in later writing.) Granted the facts of this history, it is worth recalling that the spectrum of political opinion among the larger group of Anglo-American close readers was diverse. The reactionary views of Ransom, Tate, Wimsatt, and the early Warren were not congruent with those of Richards, Leavis, Empson, or Burke, all of whom occupied leftist or liberal positions on the political spectrum of their time. For a judicious effort to situate the American New Critics politically, see Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 461–474. The political indeterminacy of close reading is interestingly confirmed by the famous case of James Jesus Angleton, a fanatical anticommunist and high-ranking CIA officer who was taught by the New Critics at Yale in the 1940s. It has been easy to invoke Angleton’s induction into close reading as evidence of the intrinsically reactionary politics of the technique itself. But this assumption is not borne out by the actual practice of the intelligence agencies, as described by the historian Michael Holzman in *Spies and Traitors: Kim Philby, James Angleton and the Friendship and Betrayal that Would Shape MI6, the CIA and the Cold War* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2021): “Angleton had been taught close reading at Yale. OSS, and MI-6, would teach him to read all over again. Interestingly, the kind of student he became was that specifically discouraged by his Yale teachers: he became a student of the history and contemporary context of the texts he studied” (87). The methodology Holzman describes is closer to New Historicism than to New Criticism.

the language of systems theory, a “second order observation.” In close reading, we observe not only the text but our observation of the text. Although such reflection need not extend beyond the scene of thought, it is always capable of being exhibited in oral or written forms of expression, making the work of reading visible to others.<sup>80</sup>

Despite its minimalism, close reading was enough of a game changer to consolidate the diverse modes of literary criticism into a discipline with a core practice that straddled the classroom and the writing of the critical essay.<sup>81</sup> Explication was a new enough game to become on occasion an end in itself. These autotelic occasions are likely now to be seen as largely those of the classroom. Stand-alone close readings are difficult to justify in print, however virtuosic they may be. Interpretation remains the higher stake.<sup>82</sup> And yet, the appeal

80. I differ in this formulation from Jonathan Kramnick's argument in *Criticism and Truth* that close reading is a craft exclusively of writing. This restriction leaves us with the problem of how to characterize the cognitive work that goes into reading before the critic begins to write. In addition, many critics do not write or publish for long periods of time, perhaps most of their career; the work of reading for them goes into their teaching, or into conversation with other scholars. My sense is that much of what Kramnick wants to say about the craft of criticism can stand without the restriction to writing.

81. In *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Paul de Man gives an accurate description of the New Critical version of close reading in his account of Reuben Brower's classroom procedure of the 1950s: “They [the students] were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them” (23).

82. The emergence of close reading as a disciplinary practice during the interwar period does not mean that the technique had never been employed before then. The “crux” in textual editing often provoked close reading, a

of the technique was powerful enough to permit any particular interpretation of a literary work after the New Criticism to offer itself as a “reading” of that work.<sup>83</sup> The metonym is the signal of technique. Not surprisingly, the generativity of close reading became increasingly problematic in the postwar period. A little close reading goes a long way; a lot risks tedium, which was not always avoided in the postwar decades.<sup>84</sup>

Explicitation became the everyday business of criticism.<sup>85</sup> Neither Wimsatt nor Brooks would have contemplated so

precedent frequently cited by Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. On Empson’s use of textual criticism, see Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists*, 92–122. Translation produces similar kinds of textual crux, although the work of reading has to be retro-engineered in this context from the translation itself. Showing the work of reading has other precedents in the history of literary pedagogy—for example, the scene recorded by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* of his childhood teacher, the Reverend James Bowyer, who liked to say that in a great poem there is a reason “not only for every word, but for the position of every word.” See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), 1:4–5. This passage is cited as a precedent to close reading in Brower, *In Defense of Reading*, 6–7.

83. When close reading is pressed to serve as interpretation, it sometimes yields an argument that interprets the literary work as about itself. New Criticism exploited this circularity of the reading-interpretation relation on many occasions; it was a specialty of Brooks, exemplified in his figure of the “well wrought urn.” Paul de Man famously elaborated the strategy into an “allegory of reading” that emerges from the collapse of interpretation onto the moment of failed comprehension, the failure of reading. Close reading in this mode traps meaning in a cul-de-sac, yielding the same interpretation ultimately for every literary work; every work becomes an “allegory of reading.”

84. See T. S. Eliot’s well-known complaint about the “lemon-squeezer school of criticism” in “The Frontiers of Criticism,” *The Sewanee Review* 64.4 (October–December 1956): 537.

85. It would be a mistake, however, to see close reading as the *only* business of criticism after its dissemination in the 1940s. In addition to the “business as usual” that was literary history—still the greater measure of published

vulgar a description of their technique as that implied by the term “business,” but one of their peers, John Crowe Ransom, invoked just this notion in the title of his most important essay, “Criticism, Inc.” Although Ransom apologizes for resorting to this possibly “distasteful figure,” he saw more clearly than other New Critics what it meant for criticism to be grounded in a technique of reading. He understood that what was implicit in the technique was *productivity*, a way of revaluing the labor of the critics as a technical proficiency: “Rather than occasional criticism by amateurs, I should think the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals.”<sup>86</sup> This famous sentence is preceded by two notable paragraphs that clarify the disciplinary stakes of technique:

Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the

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scholarship—at least one other mode of criticism ought to be acknowledged as a competitor to close reading: genre criticism. This mode of interpretation was espoused by the Chicago School of Aristotelian criticism, which contended with New Criticism—in the end, unsuccessfully—for hegemony in this period. A different version of genre criticism achieved prominence in Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, which also briefly competed with New Critical hegemony before slipping into disfavor. For genre criticism, individual works serve to exemplify a particular genre, which in turn becomes the actual object of interpretation. This mode of criticism has shadowed close reading throughout its history, most consequentially in versions of Marxist criticism. In our own time, digital analysis has revived genre criticism, and with it the role of the text as example. Some of the difficulties in establishing a relation between close reading and distant reading follow from the strong reentry of genre into disciplinary practice.

86. John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 329.

collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities.

Scientific: but I do not think we need be afraid that criticism, trying to be a sort of science, will inevitably fail and give up in despair, or else fail without realizing it and enjoy some hollow and pretentious career. It will never be a very exact science, or even a nearly exact one. But neither will psychology, if that term continues to refer to psychic rather than physical phenomena; nor will sociology as Pareto, quite contrary to his intention, appears to have furnished us with evidence for believing; nor even will economics. It does not matter whether we call them sciences or just systematic studies; the total effort of each to be effective must be consolidated and kept going. The studies which I have mentioned have immeasurably improved in understanding since they were taken over by the universities, and the same career looks possible for criticism. (329)

Contemplating these words today, it is clear that Ransom is making an important statement, perhaps the greatest insight into his moment coming down to us. His contemporaries, however, saw his claim as pretentious, a confession of the mimetic scientism of the New Critics. Neither they nor possibly Ransom himself fully understood what was implied by the gesture toward the “scientific,” though Ransom is obviously attempting to grasp the fact of technique. Having taken his insight a little too far, he starts to back away from the identification of criticism with science and keeps backing away till the end of the passage. The New Criticism, as a discourse seeking to produce knowledge about literature, was not by any measure a science, though

it might have aspired to be “precise and systematic.” The notion of “science” gestures toward something Ransom does not name in this passage, but which we can identify assuredly as technique.

Ransom was notable for his interest in technique, which he often identifies as the distinctive property of poetry; in this judgment, he is in accord with the fetish of the early New Critics. When he looks for technique, he finds it best exemplified in the most “technical” aspects of poetry, such as prosody:

Studies in the technique of the art [of poetry] belong to criticism certainly. They cannot belong anywhere else, because the technique is not peculiar to any prose materials discoverable in the work of art, nor to anything else but the unique form of that art. A very large volume of studies is indicated by this classification. They would be technical studies of poetry, for instance, the art I am especially discussing, if they treated its metric; its inversions, solecisms, lapses from the prose norm of language, and from close prose logic; its tropes, its fictions, or inventions, by which it means to secure “aesthetic distance” and removes itself from history; or any other devices, on the general understanding that any systematic usage which does not hold good for prose is a poetic device. (347)

Technique can be invoked by tracing, as though with a transparency, the *techne* of poetry, its art (Ransom calls this “texture”). The critic engaged in “technical study” crawls across the page like an ant, taking inventory along the way of every “device” of poetic art. For Ransom, these devices distinguish poetry from prose, a dubious distinction when juxtaposed

to the more inclusive concept of “literature,” but serving the purpose here of modeling technique as such. Ransom describes a notionally pure technique, which literary critics seldom undertake to describe except possibly as an exercise. Such “technical study” risks tedium, like playing scales on a piano, technique that fails to ascend to a higher level of art. Here we return to the problem highlighted by Alan Brown earlier of the contradiction between technique and sensibility. This contradiction is highly resistant to theoretical resolution, but it is performatively overcome when “showing the work of reading” is successfully integrated into the construction of an interpretation, a higher level of art.<sup>87</sup>

The principle of minimal formality confirms the fact that close reading was not disseminated by prescription or recipe; rather, it was propagated by mutual imitation.<sup>88</sup> The muddle of practice that coalesced into New Criticism accounts for the two mistakes I have noted above: on the one hand, the failure to distinguish close reading from other techniques of reading closely, such as *explication de texte*; and on the other, the overspecification of close reading as a rigid prescription,

87. For a related sense of performance, see Peter Howarth, “Close Reading as Performance,” in *Modernism and Close Reading*, ed. David James (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 45–68. Howarth sees the “performance” of close reading as extending the duration of the literary work as an “event” not completed until the reader engages with it. Howarth’s “performance” rescues the literary object from the inert existence to which New Critical proscriptions of context seemed to condemn it.

88. Here is an example from Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941), of how this mutual imitation worked: “It does not seem impossible that we should obtain close studies of the structure-texture relations that poets have actually found serviceable in the past. The best endowed critic in the world for this purpose might well be, I should think, Mr. William Empson, the student of ambiguity” (275).

in the manner of Leitch's itemized account. Whatever else might be said about close reading—and that is quite a lot, a history yet to be written—the crucial point to be made about its historical emergence is that it was conspicuously more formal than the belletristic criticism that preceded it. Crossing the threshold of technique by explicating the process of reading was sufficient to produce far-reaching effects, including the institutional effect of establishing criticism as a disciplinary practice distinct from literary history. In some respects, the emergence of close reading was an accident; but once it was devised as an imitable technique, its utility was indisputable. Its manifest and widespread appeal as technique explains why literary historians were forced to compromise with literary critics in the postwar decades of the twentieth century, to incorporate the new reading technique into normative scholarly practice.

I return once again and finally to the question with which I began: why the phrase “close reading” did not achieve consensus recognition until the 1960s. In the previous two decades the spatial trope had circulated intermittently, while the technique itself achieved the greatest extent of its dissemination, in both scholarship and teaching. The relatively small role of the term “close reading” as the name of the technique suggests that this mode of reading can be executed virtually without conceptualization. It is not necessary for those performing close reading to be able to give a precise verbal account of what they are doing, any more than it is necessary or even possible for musicians or athletes to give a precise verbal account of their performances. Minimal conceptualization of technique is compatible with a high level of artistry in performance. This muteness of technique is just as characteristic of a language art such as close reading as it

is of any nonverbal art.<sup>89</sup> On this account, close reading is an “instrument” to the second order, analogous to techniques for playing a musical instrument such as a violin or piano. Close reading “plays” the literary work. An instrument does not determine what is played on it; nor does a basic technique for playing an instrument determine how well a piece of music will be performed. The instrument itself will always be just that; but the artistry with which the instrument is played has no determined outcome or limit of sophistication. This dual potentiality has indeed been our experience of close reading. It can be done in virtuoso fashion or as a mediocre exercise.

This analysis explains why it has been so difficult to define close reading, at the same time that it has been nearly impossible to supersede it. Minimal conceptualization is characteristic of close reading as technique.<sup>90</sup> It remains

89. This is the point of the second epigraph to this essay, drawn from the preface to Reuben Arthur Brower, *The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), a book that consists largely of close readings. Brower understands that when the technique of reading is performed well, it cannot be explained fully in terms other than those that compose the performance itself.

90. There are important implications here for the teaching of close reading, at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels. Teachers have often been frustrated by the difficulty of transmitting close reading as a foundational practice of criticism, as a consequence of which they look for a formula or recipe to guide its procedure. But transmission is much more likely to succeed if close reading is modeled, either in conversational exchange with students or by analysis of written examples (such as we find in Attridge and Staten, *The Craft of Poetry*). The teacher of close reading might be relieved of considerable anxiety by the recognition that, as in so much pedagogy immemorially, demonstration and imitation are much more effective as means of transmission than specifying a procedure precisely. The demonstrative modeling of close reading will likely produce diverse examples of procedure, depending on the text at hand, which is an entirely desirable result.

for us a stage—or, better, a *staging*—of reading, in advance of interpretation, taking the difficulty of the former as the occasion for the latter. The history of close reading is not the history of interpretation, then, such as we find in our ubiquitous theory manuals, according to which the New Criticism is one interpretive method—formalism—among many. The formalism so named is a set of interconnected hypotheses that define an ontology of the literary work of art. These hypotheses proved thereafter to be irrelevant to the function of close reading as technique. As we know, with the waning of the New Criticism, concepts derived from linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy and other discourses entered Anglo-American literary study. Terms unknown to New Criticism supplemented the Brooksian trinity of irony, paradox, and ambiguity. The interpretive procedures that employed these new “theoretical” terms continued to invoke the metonym of “reading,” all the way up to the algorithmic programs of distant reading, which disclose in massive textual corpora patterns of lexical and syntactic features that seem microscopic from the perspective of ordinary reading, even ordinary close reading. Although this technique looks like the most radical overthrow of close reading, it has been seen by some as its apotheosis.<sup>91</sup>

91. On this question, see Jin, “Problems of Scale.” Jin analogizes “close” and “distant” in his argument to synecdoche and metonymy, or part-whole and part-part relations respectively. This is a useful way of grasping the scalability of both close and distant modes of reading, as opposed to the tendency to view close reading as dealing only with individual texts, distant reading only with massive numbers of texts. See also Katherine Bode, “The Equivalence of ‘Close’ and ‘Distant’ Reading; or, Toward a New Object for Data-Rich Literary History,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 78 (2017): 77–106; and Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (Oxford: Oxford University

Finally, because close reading entails no one mode of interpretation for literary works, nothing prevents it (or has prevented it) from articulation with historical or archival scholarship. With a better understanding of this point, literary study might finally move beyond the conflict between formalism and historicism that drags along so much metaphysical and ideological baggage in its train. Extreme oscillation between these theoretical poles is a sure indication of disciplinary crisis, such as we are passing through at present.<sup>92</sup> Without inquiring further into the causes of what

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Press, 2014). Pressman summarizes her position: "We need to recognize how close reading is a historical and media-specific technique that, like other critical practices, demands renovation as we embrace our modern age and its digital literature" (18). On the other side of the argument, Matthew L. Jockers, in *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), argues strongly that close reading is inadequate as a method to sustain literary study into the future, and that it is time to make a definite transition to distant reading—or "macroanalysis," to use his preferred term. Whatever distinction is asserted between close and distant reading, it is helpful to set out from the recognition that the two are consonant as techniques. Beyond that ground of identity, specifying their different technicities poses many theoretical problems, especially those arising from the difference in the scale of criticism's objects: work, oeuvre, genre, corpus. Resolving issues of scale will no doubt also require a better understanding of how meso-scale structures such as plot and character are processed in the experience of reading. Other examples of meso-structure would include the "clues" crucial to Franco Moretti's study of detective fiction. The number of such structures is indeterminate, and they are peculiarly resistant to reduction to the methodological techniques of either close reading or distant reading. Of course, meso-structures are also in the end just assemblages of words, but they are not processed cognitively in the same way that close reading does at the scale of the quoted passage, or distant reading at the "bag of words" scale. For an important retrospective on the theoretical questions raised by the technicities of qualitative and quantitative modes of interpretation, see Franco Moretti, "The Roads to Rome," *New Left Review* 124 (July–August 2020): 125–136.

92. Disciplinary crisis gave birth to close reading at an earlier moment of oscillation between competing modes of reading, between the critics and the

seems to be a loss of faith in disciplinary modes of reading (these causes are both internal and external to the discipline), I propose that the reemergence of close reading in theoretical discourse has exposed the troubled border between disciplinary and lay practices of reading. In this context, it is precisely close reading's minimal formality that is of interest, the fact of its being located so near the threshold between the intuitive and the technical. This, I take it, is just the question raised by Derek Attridge and Henry Staten in their "minimal interpretation," which they might without apology embrace as an exemplary practice of close reading.

## CODA: ON ATTENTION TO LITERATURE

There are other reasons for affirming close reading at the present moment that bring the notion of "attention to the words on the page" back into relation to the larger social frame of my argument. I have assumed throughout this book that attention is a necessary but not sufficient condition for establishing close reading as a cultural technique with (ordinarily) an institutional locus of practice. As a technique inaugurated by an act of attention, close reading is one of many possible attentional practices. In the university, some cultural disciplines employ parallel techniques of what we might call "close looking" and "close listening." Like close reading, these

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literary historians. Crisis is not always the harbinger of disaster; it can be the occasion for resolution of long-standing problems in theory or practice.

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techniques call for attention at the threshold of technique. This common feature of the cultural disciplines brings the larger social ecology of attention to the fore, as the environment of a cognitive state uniquely challenged by the cultural conditions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century modernity. No one needs to be persuaded that the demands on our attention emanating from new and old media are overwhelming; or that, conversely, *distraction* is the manic complement of attention—that we are, as T. S. Eliot famously declared in *Four Quartets*, “Distracted from distraction by distraction.” “Attention” and “distraction” were favored terms for Eliot, Richards, and their contemporaries in their analyses of mass-mediated forms of culture. The declinist narratives so often resulting from these engagements, however, failed to account for the complexity of the psychological state indicated by the concept of attention. Every cultural work that distracts us does so by soliciting our attention. Attention and distraction are different expressions of the same cognitive complex, different ways of observing its operation.<sup>93</sup>

93. The subject of attention has occasioned a minor industry of commentary, usually taking as its point of departure William James's famous chapter on attention in his treatise of 1890, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 380–433. The phenomenon of distraction has correlatively been recognized as more than just the antithesis or failure of attention; it is rather a state that has its distinct occasions and pleasures. The complementarity of attention and distraction is explored at length by the art historian Jonathan Crary in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), from which I cite this statement, summarizing psychological research: “the more one investigated, the more attention was shown to contain within itself the conditions for its own undoing—attention was in fact continuous with states of distraction, reverie, dissociation, and trance” (45–46).

Bearing this point in mind, it seems evident that the defense of literary reading against its rivals in the realm of cultural consumption too often resorts to a reductive emphasis on attention in an effort to save literature. If the immersive reading of long novels, for example, is offered as the chief case of failed attention among our students, it is easy to point to video gaming as a counterexample. This form has the effect of powerfully fixating attention, suggesting that attention alone is not the issue in the failure of literary reading. A better way to address this problem is to start from the difference between writing as a media form and the multimedia apparatus of the video game. The difference that matters is between writing's static marks on a page—the only source of visual stimulation the reading of a novel ordinarily affords—and the interactive kinetic imagery that is the vector of narrative in the video game. Narrative in written form can produce a kind of complex phenomenal experience that is available only in the medium of writing, where long strings of sentences generate singular effects of meaning.<sup>94</sup> This is not to deny that the video game—to stay with this example—delivers its own kind of complex narrative pleasure. It is rather to assert that the cognitive techniques demanded in the use of media as different as the novel and the video game are not easily commensurable and have to be socially valued separately. These two media forms are not just alternative vehicles for delivering narrative, the one more stimulating than the other in

94. The medial effect of writing cannot for this reason be represented predominantly by narrative, which is only one of many modes of writing. The writing effect as such belongs rather to the sheer concatenation of sentences, which results in a phenomenal experience unique to reading. The poverty of the visual stimulation afforded by lines of text contrasts greatly with the diverse forms of cognitive experience writing makes possible.

sensory terms. On the contrary, engagements with narrative in these two media are essentially different cognitive experiences. One cannot be substituted for the other.

As complementary states of mind, “attention” and “distraction” have been remarked for millennia. They constitute a primitive dialectic, operating at the level of the individual psyche but articulated to larger social structures. Was the Gothic cathedral, with its display of architectural and imagistic wonders, designed to focus attention on religious meaning or to distract the populace from its less stimulating everyday environment? Surely the one by means of the other. Every moment in which attention and distraction are set into relation by a technical artifact constitutes the experience of a modernity for a given population. These technological modernities go back very much farther than the interwar period of the twentieth century, when close reading was devised alongside the proliferation of film, radio, magazines, bestsellers—all the massified cultural forms provoking anxiety among the literary professoriate. Close reading emerged as a technique out of a paradoxical media situation in which the very forms of writing that could be regarded in earlier historical periods as sources of entertainment and therefore distraction—poems, novels, plays—were dialectically repositioned as demanding the most strenuous effort of attention.<sup>95</sup>

95. Nicholas Dames, in *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), argues that distraction was solicited by the novel form itself. This thesis cautions us against positing the same attentional demand for all forms of writing. I do not mean to suggest, on the other hand, that literary works could not be read seriously or “closely” before the twentieth century; rather, these forms circulated in a cultural ecosystem in which the reading of scripture, devotional writing, and other moral or instructional genres was regarded as indisputably more serious

This new emphasis on attention to literature was not unjustified; it was a cultural development responding to the latest technological modernity, the diffusion of new media, along with the proliferation of writing itself in new popular as well as bureaucratic forms. The response was no doubt rhetorically overheated; but it was also the occasion for developing a technique of reading adjusted to a new condition of writing, and a new condition of literature. In that new condition, those literary works that successfully attracted close reading had the best chance to enter the school curriculum, and thus to survive over the long term.<sup>96</sup>

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than the reading of poems, plays, and novels. Readers of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* will recall the scene in which Mr. Collins is asked to read aloud from a novel to an assembled evening party. He replies scornfully that he does not read novels, and chooses instead to read several pages from Fordyce's *Sermons*. The lesson should be obvious for those of us who wonder how literature—even novels—can be regarded by some of our students with the same lack of relish as the iconic sermons of Fordyce. When teachers of literature confront resistance to the reading of long works such as novels, the problem is not so much the absolute inability of students to focus attention at all (that is a different question), but their experience (or lack of experience) with the medium of writing in certain of its generic forms. This is to say that attention is always oriented toward a particular object, and that the power of an object to actuate the attention/distraction complex is an index of its social condition.

96. For a fascinating study of how one poem—Thomas Wyatt's "They flee from me"—attracted iconic close reading by the New Critics, see Peter Murphy, *The Long Public Life of a Short Private Poem: Reading and Remembering Thomas Wyatt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 175–209. In my experience, Wyatt's poem offers occasion for close reading in the classroom with its opening line, "They flee from me, that sometime did me seek." Who are "they"? What are "they"? Most students stumble over this threshold, a challenge to comprehension that conveniently opens a path for close reading. Other kinds of writing will suggest different paths to technique in close reading. Forging those paths for diverse works of literature has been a large part of post-New Critical literary study.

Literary scholars have not always been at ease with the fact that close reading functioned as a means of producing rarity in response to the condition of superabundant writing. Without question, close reading functioned as an institutional means of sorting literary work in the twentieth century and after, in response to the massification and potential ephemeralization of literary writing. Other institutions of sorting have emerged for this purpose too, such as the loose collection of agencies whose purpose is to award prizes. These agencies also produce rarity, improving the possibilities for circulation and preservation of prizewinning works.<sup>97</sup> The preeminent mechanism of sorting, however, remains the *market*, in which literary works are thrown into a pseudo-Darwinian competition for survival. There are reasons scholars might not want to cede the social function of sorting literary production wholly to the market. Close reading and distant reading are more allied in this purpose than we might suppose, in that they both constitute a nonmarket system of sorting. Distant reading works with the category of genre, for example, in order to bring the mass of writing into the domain of the intelligible, organized at the macro level by the distinction between “serious” and “popular” writing.<sup>98</sup>

97. The production of rarity is in turn subject to a reversal as the number of prize-awarding agencies increases and the number of prizewinning or “short-listed” works of literature accumulates beyond the ability of a single individual to read them. For an authoritative study of the prize-awarding system, see James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

98. Franco Moretti and the Stanford Literary Lab offer a pioneering demonstration of this sorting effect in Mark Algee-Hewitt et al., “Canon/Archive,” in *Canon/Archive: Studies in Quantitative Formalism*, ed. Franco Moretti (New York: n + 1 Books, 2017), 253–294. Taking as its object “type-

This sorting procedure delivers some literary works over to the procedure of close reading, although any and every literary work is in principle capable of being read closely, by one or another disciplinary technique.

In retrospect, close reading was destined to call forth its complement in distant reading, as the condition of reading and writing entered yet another phase of massification and technological disturbance. To put this proposition conversely, and also perhaps more precisely: Franco Moretti's call for "distant reading" in his 2000 essay, "Conjectures on World Literature," constructed distant reading as the properly dialectical complement of close reading.<sup>99</sup> When the implications

token" ratios in novels, this essay attempts to refind canonical works buried in the mass of the archive, to distinguish these works from the "great unread." My sense is that it will take some time to assess the implications of this project, which recovers a driver of canon-formation intrinsic to literary writing at the micro-level of style, something like the Holy Grail of distant reading.

99. The moment: Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 54 (January–February 2000): 54–68, reprinted in *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013): "At bottom [close reading is] a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously—whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge" (48). My hypothesis of a dialectical moment is not the only way distant reading has been understood as historical. Ted Underwood, in "A Genealogy of Distant Reading," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11.2 (2017), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/2/000317/000317.html>, disassociates distant reading from new digital technology and discovers its origins in older scholarship such as that of Raymond Williams and Janice Radway, working "on the boundary between literary history and social science." Although I believe Underwood is right about the disciplinary foundations of distant reading (and he might not, in any case, reject the historical significance of Moretti's 2000 intervention), my story concerns the emergence of "distant reading" as a name that organizes practice in such a way as to evoke common features, and even to organize scholars into new

of distant reading began to sink into the consciousness of the literary professoriate, the dialectic of close and distant reading became inevitable. Moretti's invocation of distant reading, though it was not the first use of the term, was posed in such a way as to *create its moment*. Is it not evident in retrospect that our renewed interest in close reading today dates from this moment of distant reading's introduction? If we are dealing with a genuinely dialectical pivot in the discipline, it should no longer be possible to regard close reading and distant reading as procedures between which we must choose.

Refusing the undialectical choice also means recognizing that even the most sophisticated computational forms of distant reading cannot circulate as meaningful knowledge about the mass of literary writing if some portion of what is written is not read with immersive engagement or enhanced forms of attention—possibly even close reading. Returning to the conditions of close reading's emergence in the interwar period, I suggest that we might think of the technique at its origin as an effort to *deindustrialize* mass literacy, a notion that I offer here tentatively, and without (I hope) reintroducing a mode of cultural critique burdened with the metaphysical investments of the New Criticism.<sup>100</sup> These crypto-religious attach-

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cadres. In this context, the term "distant reading" performs a disciplinary function analogous to that of "close reading."

100. *Deindustrialization*, because close reading orients the technique of reading toward a bodily *techne* (signaled by such tropes as "close" and "slow") and away from technology, which is inevitably associated in the social imaginary with machine manufacture. Perhaps this is why close reading, as typically practiced for most of its history, was indifferent to the technical medium, whether manuscript, print, or screen. Distant reading, by contrast, moves toward technology, toward computation by means of computer technology. For an account of what is implied by a media and technology-conscious relation

ments are recalled in Moretti's recognition of close reading as a "theological exercise," which perhaps leaves open the possibility of *dethelogizing* the technique, purging it of its residual mystifications. In practice, this means opening the literary to the profane technique of quantitative analysis. *Dethelogizing* does not imply an end to close reading, only the necessity of resituating it in the discipline.

The two imperatives of deindustrialization and *dethelogization* punctuate the history of close reading, the record of the technique's struggle with the conditions of its emergence and reemergence. If this hypothesis is credible, it might explain close reading's return to the forefront of the discipline at the present moment, when digital technology has given us immeasurable new quantities of industrialized textual "content" and even the automation of writing itself.<sup>101</sup> The

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to the literary object, see Alan Liu, *Friending the Past: The Sense of History in the Digital Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); and Alan Liu, "Imagining the New Media Encounter," in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, ed. Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 1–25.

101. Leroi-Gourhan did not foresee this development when he predicted the end of writing. Flusser, however, comes closer to envisioning the culmination of both reading and writing in total automation. See *Does Writing Have a Future?*: "This new way of reading is beginning to crystallize now. It is called, of course, 'computing'" (84). This kind of reading "no longer needs to be intelligent, to be about extracting meaning. It can concentrate on creative amalgamation" (85). The notion of "creative amalgamation" seems to prophesy ChatGPT. The procedure of a "large language model" is perhaps implicit in all writing; ChatGPT writes, as do humans, by assembling—"amalgamating"—what it reads. The margin of the creative in this amalgamation is yet to be determined. The tumultuous introduction of generative writing programs such as ChatGPT is only the latest episode in our never-ending struggle to understand what our technology does for us and to us. It will not be easy, for example, to establish a method to read the writing produced by our algorithmic

introduction of digital analysis into literary study forces us yet again to confront the question of what reading can be in an age of mass literacy, especially after that “mass” has been fractured into thousands of sites and modes of reading and writing, dispersed into what we now call “networks.” If machine reading engages the massification of text production in order to produce knowledge about an otherwise unreadable accumulation, human reading will always be limited by the constraints of the human body; unlike machine reading, human reading is very slow indeed.<sup>102</sup> In the disciplinary form of close reading, reading is slowed down further still, in order for the reader to engage in a reflexive procedure of observing and manifesting the work of reading. Decelerating the pace of reading does not refer literally to the movement of the eyes across lines of text; the qualifier “slow” rather

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programs. Can such writing be submitted to close reading? The fact that this writing is composed—or recomposed—of what human beings have already written does not immediately solve this problem. Yet N. Katherine Hayles is optimistic about a solution. See her “Afterword: Learning to Read AI Texts,” *Critical Inquiry*, “Forum” (June 30, 2023), <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2023/06/30/afterword-learning-to-read-ai-texts/>.

102. Speed reading is a response to the same social conditions as close reading. Both techniques of reading—one a fraudulent commercial enterprise, the other an established method of reading situated in a university discipline—testify to the shock of mass literacy, the reader’s expulsion from that (imaginary) pastoral scene in which there were fewer texts and more time to linger with these texts. Speed reading was never a solution to this problem, because the top speed of reading is a neurophysiological constant, determined by the minimum duration of saccades. No technique of human reading can exceed this speed limit, which is why techniques for human reading move in the opposite direction to technology, toward slowing reading down into a reflective process, an art.

signals the inauguration of technique, which requires time for reflection.<sup>103</sup>

We might see close reading today as the disciplinary analogue of the countercultural movement embracing “slow tech” and other slow forms of cultural consumption.<sup>104</sup> If the concept of attention announces this alternative mode of consumption in the instance of reading, it is also a name for what is problematic in our engagement with cultural works generally. Nothing ensures that our momentary attention to any particular cultural work, whatever its media form, will give us what we want from it—not unless we succeed in prolonging our attention, at least provisionally. In the course of this probationary engagement, we are sometimes able to arrest the constant deflections of our attention; we succeed in bringing our sensory and cognitive apparatuses into focus upon a single object, a neurophysiological state that distracts us from competing solicitations of attention. The ability to achieve this state has considerable social value, even if it is only sometimes achieved. Such coherent states of attention are difficult to produce and difficult to sustain. It is even

103. Harry Berger, Jr., argued for “decelerated” close reading in *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 45, 144, 148, as did Sven Birkerts that same year in his “Note: Close Reading,” in *The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), 92.

104. For an application of this value concept to the reading of literature, see David Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). For an overview, see Andrew Price, *Slow-Tech: Manifesto for an Over-Wound World* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009); and Rob Kitchin and Alistair Fraser, *Slow Computing: Why We Need Balanced Digital Lives* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).

more challenging to raise these attentive states to the level of technique, or *techne*.

Heretofore, we have been inclined to conceive of attention too simply in terms of an economy, as a quantum, usually measured as the time we devote to any particular object of attention.<sup>105</sup> But this construction does not do justice to the nature of attention as the condition for extremely diverse dispositions toward cultural artifacts, marked both by different commitments in time and by different modes of engagement. It is not surprising that this qualitative diversity characterizes our engagement with written artifacts, perhaps more than with most of the objects soliciting our attention. There are many ways to read. In this context, it is worth repeating that immersive reading is not close reading, and that close reading interrupts immersive reading in order to initiate a rarified technique. Let us also admit that the quality of attention demanded by the form of reading we call “close” is difficult to sustain outside an institutional setting, such as the discipline of literary study affords. Other kinds of reading closely, of course, have other social and institutional scenes of practice.<sup>106</sup>

The value of close reading as technique is more than great enough, in my view, to merit its continued support,

<sup>105</sup>. I follow the argument here (with some reservations) of Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017). Citton wants to move away from the “economy of attention” to an “ecology,” in which individual acts of attention are seen as “essentially collective” (7). Citton is building on as well as revising the earlier work of Richard Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>106</sup>. I have attempted a taxonomy of the modes of reading specific to scholarship in “How Scholars Read.”

even if this art is for the most part confined to the university. There is no point in forcing close reading, as a modality of attentional practice, into competition with the alternative modes of reading described by N. Katherine Hayles as "hyper" and "distant."<sup>107</sup> The domain of close reading is necessarily circumscribed in relation to the diversity and multiplicity of reading situations. Attempting a balanced view of the current status of close reading in *The Ecology of Attention*, Yves Citton follows Hayles's taxonomy in urging this policy: "The humanities should adopt a PLURALIST UNDERSTANDING OF READING, recognizing the complementary (*rather than rival*) nature of close reading, distant hyper-reading and machine reading" (148). The recommendation is not unwarranted. There is no literary pedagogy as yet, however, that gives these modes of reading equal time in the classroom. The phenomenal diversity of reading argues against a pluralism in which modes are simply equated.<sup>108</sup> We might even want to concede the greater social value of immersive reading by comparison to all the modes addressed by Hayles and Citton. The ongoing legitimization crisis of literary study

107. N. Katherine Hayles, "How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine" *ADE Bulletin* 150 (2010): 1–18.

108. To specify the conditions which a commensuration of reading modes would have to acknowledge: (1) *close reading* assumes a collectivity of university or college-educated readers, engaged with literary texts in the classroom or in scholarly writing; (2) *hyper reading* is something everyone does, both inside and outside the academy, as a largely intuitive action, though it might well be submitted to methodization; and (3) *machine reading* involves a highly technical specialization undertaken at present only by a fraction of the humanities professoriate and (as yet) imperfectly reconciled with earlier disciplinary norms. *Immersive reading* falls outside this taxonomy, as a practice mainly of the lay mode of reading, which can of course be undertaken by both lay and professional readers.

that employs the slogans of "surface reading" and "postcritique" testifies to an ongoing reevaluation of reading in the immersive form, as practiced by both professional and lay readers. Only this form ultimately secures the future of literature. Still, the disciplinary technique of close reading has an important role to play in response to a media situation revolutionized once again by new technology. The least that one might say about the social importance of close reading is that, as one technique of reading among others, it is a node in a larger, unorganized network of attentional techniques, both within and without the university. These cultural techniques are well worth the effort of their transmission.

# ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Scott Newstok*

BOSWELL: Then, Sir, what is poetry?

JOHNSON: Why Sir, it is much easier to say  
what it is not. We all *know* what light is;  
but it is not easy to *tell* what it is.

JAMES BOSWELL,

*Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791)

single phrases

. . . contain a whole library of meanings

EDWARD SAID, “Erich Auerbach,  
Critic of the Earthly World” (2004)