

# The Closeness of Close Reading

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IN MANY English departments, and I daresay foreign language departments as well, the practice of close reading, of examining closely the language of a literary work or a section of it, has been something we take for granted, as a sine qua non of literary study, a skill that we expect our students to master and that we certainly expect of job candidates, whatever other sorts of critical activities they may flamboyantly display. But perhaps precisely because we do generally agree to value it, we have not given it much thought recently, at least not in broad public critical discussion. As a good Saussurian, I believe that meaning is the product of differences—any term is defined by what it is opposed to—so to think about close reading one should begin with what it is contrasted with. We don't really seem to have an antonym for *close reading*, which may be part of the problem. The most obvious might be Franco Moretti's "distant reading," but this is scarcely reading at all: Moretti's fascinating analyses of large-scale trends, whether in the spread of genres across Europe, the publication of translations, the length of titles of novels, or marriage patterns in Jane Austen's novels, provide extremely valuable perspectives in literary studies but are too divergent from regular modes of literary analysis to serve in a defining contrast.<sup>1</sup> This distant reading would turn any sort of attention to an individual text into close reading.

Perhaps what contrasts with close reading is not distant reading but something like sloppy reading, or casual reading, an assessment of "life and works," or even thematic interpretation or literary history. The fact that we have difficulty saying what close reading is opposed to suggests that it has served as a slogan more than as a name for a particular definable practice. In a book that does propose an alternative practice, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, Peter Middleton calls *close reading* "our contemporary term for a heterogeneous and largely unorganized set of practices and assumptions" (5).<sup>2</sup>

There are indeed different traditions of close reading: practices inherited from Anglo-American New Criticism and those that derive from the French tradition of explication de texte, as well as more recent versions of deconstructive, rhetorical, and psychoanalytic reading. A recent volume collecting distinguished examples of close reading emphasizes that while the practice is associated with the formalism of the New Criticism, critics of historicist and other persuasions have also practiced close attention to the language, tone, and figures of a text (Lentricchia and Dubois). In the English department at Cornell, people do very different things with literature, but we all seem to subscribe or at least pay lip service to the idea that close reading is important to what we do, and it is always pertinent criticism of a job candidate to say that in the end his or her writing samples do not include much close reading or that he or she does not really do close reading. Close reading, like motherhood and apple pie, is something we are all in favor of, even if what we do when we think we are doing close reading is very different.

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Middleton's formulation, "a heterogeneous and largely unorganized set of practices and assumptions," seems to presume that close reading ought to be a more homogeneous and organized practice. Whether that is so or not, we should at least reflect on our assumptions and what we believe the practice is. I think above all that we cannot just take close reading for granted, especially as we welcome into the university a generation of students raised in instant messaging, where language becomes a crude, ever more abbreviated code for communicating minimal information. Let me turn, as a point of departure for thinking about close reading, to a description of the practice offered by an immigrant who came to the United States after the Second World War and experienced close reading in a well-known literature course in a humanities program. In an essay whose title, "The Return to Philology," provides an unlikely genealogy for close reading (philology, after all, was what medievalists who refused really to read were thought to practice), Paul de Man describes the approach of Reuben Brower's Hum 6 course at Harvard, a multisection course that attracted the most talented teaching assistants, eager to work with the distinctive kind of literary experience generated in this course, in a department where otherwise traditional literary history was the norm. De Man writes:

Students, as they began to write, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They 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 and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge. This very simple rule, surprisingly enough, had far-reaching didactic consequences. I have never known a course by which students were so transformed. (23)

This passage from "The Return to Philology" hints at the radical nature of close reading, achieved through the "analytical rigor" of attention to the philological or rhetorical devices of language. The results of this pedagogical decision were startling, de Man reported:

Mere reading, it turns out, prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history. Close reading accomplishes this often in spite of itself because it cannot fail to respond to structures of language which it is the more or less secret aim of literary teaching to keep hidden. (24)

De Man describes accurately some of the effects of a certain kind of close reading, especially in an academic context where literary study concentrated primarily on the description of how works belonged to a literary period or expressed the underlying thought of a great author. When I was an undergraduate at Harvard, some years later, this course and courses taught by young faculty members who had worked in it, were seen as the most serious, most engaged examples of literary study—by contrast, say, with Walter Jackson Bate's lecture courses on the greatness of Keats,

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or of Dr. Johnson, who actually sounded rather similar in his account of their deep commitment to fundamental human values.

De Man's description helpfully conveys one thing that is crucial to the practice of close reading: a respect for the stubbornness of texts, which resist easy comprehension or description in terms of expected themes and motifs. The close reader needs to be willing to take seriously the difficulties of singular, unexpected turns of phrase, juxtapositions, and opacity. Close reading teaches an interest in the strangeness or distinctiveness of individual works and parts of works. But the emphases in de Man's description on "bafflement" might be taken to suggest that the goal of close reading is to determine the meaning, to produce an interpretation. In fact, the work of close reading is not primarily to resolve difficulties but above all to describe them, to elucidate their source and implications. I would stress that close reading need not involve detailed interpretation of literary passages (though there is plenty of that around in close reading, especially when the texts in question are difficult to understand), but especially attention to how meaning is produced or conveyed, to what sorts of literary and rhetorical strategies and techniques are deployed to achieve what the reader takes to be the effects of the work or passage. Thus it involves poetics as much as hermeneutics.

But the passage from de Man does disservice to the discussion of close reading in one important respect. It makes it sound as though all you need is a negative discipline, a refusal to leap to the kind of paraphrases one has been led to expect, so that effective close reading requires no technique or training, only an avoidance of bad or dubious training. The suggestion seems to be that if one strips away these bad habits and simply encounters the text, without preconceptions, close reading will occur. If, as de Man puts it, you are "attentive" and "honest," close reading "cannot fail to respond to structures of language" that most literary education strives "to keep hidden." Attention is important but not, alas, enough. Readers can always fail to respond—though then de Man might not want to dignify the practice with the name of reading.

It is our conception of close reading as a fundamental practice that makes us want to believe that it can occur without explicit instruction. As soon as we come up with accounts of particular operations students should carry out or steps they should follow, we fear that we are producing something like doctrine about the functioning of literary works and steps of a critical method. We want to believe that close reading is something more basic, more fundamental, than theories of literature or critical methodologies. Hence, perhaps, our willingness to allow that there are various different ways to do close reading—if we insisted that there was one correct way, we would clearly be championing a particular method or critical orientation and a particular vision of literature.

But responding to language and textual details is not something that takes place automatically or necessarily. Instruction is necessary. Though New Critics were themselves often disdainful of textbooks, which they saw as crude or mechanical, in the heyday of the New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* and then Laurence Perrine's *Sound and Sense* provided instruction in the things to look out for and questions to ask when confronted with a poem, and they did much to establish an orthodoxy of close reading. More frequently, though,

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close reading was taught by example. Certainly one reason students were enthusiastic about Reuben Brower's course, Hum 6, where there was no textbook, was that they could learn, both from Brower's lectures and from talented section leaders in small discussion groups, how to ask new questions about the functioning of language in texts and how to come up with observations that were surprising in an educational context where broad literary historical remarks were the norm. The charismatic pedagogue could pose a question you had not thought of about relations between form and meaning or point to a textual difficulty that had escaped your notice but that would repay reflection and discussion. Seeing teachers do things with texts that did not just happen naturally when you confronted the text yourself was crucial to the success of this course. Students learned not just to avoid the moves made in other courses but also and especially to make other sorts of moves and attend to puzzles and difficulties that they might earlier have been inclined to ignore or gloss over.

Partly because of our resistance to textbooks for literary study and explicit instructions, there exists a wide range of practices of close reading or, as Middleton called it, "a heterogeneous and largely unorganized set of practices." The crucial thing is to slow down, though "slow reading" is doubtless a less useful slogan than either "slow food" or "close reading," since slow reading may be inattentive, distracted, lethargic. *Close* asks for a certain myopia—a *Verfremdungseffekt*. It enjoins looking at rather than through the language of the text and thinking about how it is functioning, finding it puzzling. Barbara Johnson writes:

Teaching literature is teaching how to read. How to notice things in a text that a speed-reading culture is trained to disregard, overcome, edit out, or explain away; how to read what the language is doing, not guess what the author was thinking; how to take in evidence from a page, not seek a reality to substitute for it. (140)

In her essay "Teaching Deconstructively," she provides, with an unusually bold explicitness, a series of examples of different kinds of signifying conflicts or tensions that students should look for in passages they are studying: ambiguous words, undecidable syntax, incompatibilities between what a text says and what it does, incompatibilities between the literal and the figurative, incompatibilities between explicitly foregrounded assertions and illustrative examples, and so on. Such attention involves "a careful teasing out of the warring forces of signification that are at work within the text itself" (141).

There are all sorts of ways of achieving closeness in reading. Very different from Johnson's mode is memorization—unfashionable these days but one way to become intimate with the language of the text. Helen Vendler remarks that musicians learn the pieces they are going to perform and that critics should not shy away from learning by heart the poems they are discussing, since this exercise gives a sense of how elements of the language fit together. A strategy modeled by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* is to oblige students to comment on every clause in a passage, identifying the codes at work in producing whatever meaning they take to be at play there and in the connections between elements of this passage and those elsewhere in the text. The virtue of such quasi-mechanical systematicity is to compel a different sort of attention. A related procedure is promoting close reading of Shakespeare, as Marjorie Garber has

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done, using George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy*, a Renaissance rhetorical treatise, and requiring students to find examples of the tropes Puttenham describes. The goal is to estrange reading, to give it a different optic. Another artificial way of slowing down reading and producing effects of closeness is translation. This is how literature used to be taught, of course: the class collectively translated Vergil or Horace, line by line, learning along the way about rhetorical structures and figures and things such as mythological allusions. There would be little enthusiasm for bringing back this sort of class, but as a strategy for encouraging attention to the details of a text, it has its merits. Certainly working with translation, which is anathema in many foreign literature classes, is an excellent way to enforce slow and close reading, of texts in languages students are learning as well as texts in their native languages.

This range of possibilities raises questions about the nature of the closeness of close reading. In *Le plaisir du texte* Barthes imagines a typology of pleasures based on reading neuroses: the fetishist treasures the fragment or turn of phrase; the obsessional is a manipulator of metalanguages and glosses; the paranoid a deep interpreter, seeker of hidden meanings; and the hysteric an enthusiast who abandons all distance to throw himself or herself into the text (*Pleasure* 63). The fetishist and the paranoid illustrate quite different modes of closeness, as do the diverse varieties of what has been called symptomatic reading, which may attend closely to the language of the text in order to detect ideological complicities or psychological investments, where a textual detail is a sign of some larger historical or psychological reality. The notion of closeness might alert us to the importance, for the practice of close reading, of remaining close to the language of the text, even when it is made to serve as a metalanguage, as in the work of Jacques Derrida, for example, instead of treating the portions of a text that have been closely examined as markers for a reading whose interests lie altogether elsewhere.

It may become especially important to reflect on the varieties of close reading and even to propose explicit models, in an age where new electronic resources make it possible to do literary research without reading at all: find all the instances of the words *beg* and *beggar* in novels by two different authors and write up your conclusions.

In *Sollers écrivain*, Barthes suggests that there are five modes of reading Sollers, reading in different keys, as it were: *en piqué*, *en prisé*, *en déroulé*, *en rase-mottes*, and *en plein-ciel*, which might be rendered as a "spearing" reading, a "savoring" reading, an "unrolling" reading, a "nose to the ground" reading, and a "full horizon" reading (75). The deeply engaged savoring and the word-by-word nose-to-the-ground modes would be versions of close reading, as opposed to the opportunistic spearing of tasty morsels, the swift following of the plot in the unrolling mode, and the synoptic overview of full-horizon reading. Though this particular typology does not seem especially promising, its example might serve as a stimulus to better thought out and more copiously exemplified typologies. We would be better equipped to value and to promote close reading if we had a more finely differentiated sense of its modes and a more vivid account of all the types of nonclose reading with which it contrasts and that give it salience, making it more than something desirable that is taken for granted.

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Notes

1. For genres and translations, see Moretti, *Atlas* and *Graphs*; for titles, see Moretti, "Style"; and for Austen, see Moretti, *Atlas*.

2. Middleton argues that the recognition of the diverse contexts in which poems are encountered is not irrelevant to their meaning and that reading should take the measure of the distances poems have traveled. His "distant" thus need not contrast with close reading, since attention to the various distant contexts in which the poem's words are encountered can serve an analysis of "the words on the page."

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