

# Close Reading: Prologue and Epilogue

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IN THIS essay I look at two moments in a possible history of close reading from the interwar period to the present. By *close reading*, I do not mean the same thing as reading closely, which arguably describes many different practices of reading from antiquity to the modern era. I assume rather that close reading is a modern academic practice with an inaugural moment, a period of development, and now perhaps a phase of decline. I restrict my comments to only two moments in this institutional narrative, which I will call prologue and epilogue. These moments raise nearly identical psychological concerns about the relation between the consumption of media and the reading of literature.

I associate the prologue and epilogue with the names of two scholars, I. A. Richards and N. Katherine Hayles. The first name has long been identified with the origins of close reading. Richards inaugurated a practice of reading that, if not precisely the same as what later came to be known as close reading, laid the foundation for it. His work constitutes my prologue. The second name is Hayles, although by no means is she the only recent critic to raise questions, directly or indirectly, about the status of close reading. As it happens, she makes her argument in language that strongly echoes (probably unintentionally) that of Richards. In a 2007 article in *Profession* entitled “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” Hayles argues that the two modes of cognition named in her title define contrasting orientations to our media environment. She goes on to link these two orientations—we might say that this is a very hot link—to the difference between literary reading and the consumption of nonliterary media. In her words, “deep attention” is “the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities”; this style “is characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times.” Hyper attention, by contrast, “is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (187, 188).

Clearly Hayles intends by means of this distinction to provide some analysis to back up anecdotal observations about the changing relation of our students to literature as a result of their formation in a changing media environment. What she describes obviously worries many teachers, who feel that they must figure out how to overcome ever greater resistance to the mode of reading that literary works seem to demand. Without raising the question of close reading directly, her essay usefully confronts the pervasive anxiety of literature teachers head-on. She tries to stare this anxiety down by welcoming the emergence of hyper attention as a new mode of cognition, supplementing though not replacing deep attention. In her view, hyper

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attention is an adaptive response to the saturation of the cultural environment by new media. Those who are hyper attentive exhibit a heightened “environmental alertness and flexibility of response.” They are as comfortable with multitasking as their predecessors were with passing solitary hours in reading a novel: “Hyper attention excels at negotiating rapidly changing environments in which multiple foci compete for attention” (188).

Hayles believes, probably rightly, that deep attention and hyper attention can happily coexist; her refusal to panic is an appealing alternative to either of two other possible responses to our cultural situation: on the one hand rejecting the new mode of cognition altogether, and on the other celebrating it for relegating deep attention to cultural obsolescence. It seems generous and right at this moment in our cultural history to recognize that the proliferation of media has changed us and will continue to change us and that we cannot simply refuse these changes. To indulge a revanchist inclination would mean putting ourselves on the wrong side of history, like those professors who not so long ago resisted admitting vernacular literature into the college curriculum. Yet what Hayles calls a “synergistic combination of hyper and deep attention” (193) suggests in the present circumstances that anything *less* than the synergistic ideal she calls for will result in an irreparable loss for the cultural works requiring deep attention. To her credit, she is quite aware of this possible cost. When she invokes a novel by Dickens as the kind of cultural work that calls for deep attention, we are to understand that this work stands in for all the cultural works put at risk by the cultural transformation that she welcomes and that in any case cannot be resisted.

The balance or “synergy” between deep attention and hyper attention is by no means assured, even for Hayles. The prevalence of hyper attention means that some persons might never develop the ability to focus for long periods of time on one object, such as a novel. The example of the novel, however, does not quite capture the full spectrum of cognitive processes entailed by deep attention. It is perhaps a mistake to see the mode of deep attention as oriented mainly toward the long work—that is, toward the question of the duration of attention. Poetry too, even short poems, demands sustained attention. The situation of poetry, I would suggest, is even more problematic than that of narrative prose, for reasons that concern the quality as much as the duration of attention. The short poem might never raise the cognitive issue of the duration of attention, but it alerts us to the kind of deep attention resulting from the practice of *rereading*. As we all know, Richards adumbrated a technique of close reading directed primarily to short poems, which he enjoined his students to read over and over. This iterative technique produced a recursive effect, a slightly different cognitive and emotional experience with each reading. Is this mode of cognition a version of deep attention? If it is, we will have to modify our definition of deep attention to include cognitive processes that are not simply equated with duration of attention; in other words, we will have to reconsider the relation between deep attention and close attention.

The iterative technique of close reading, as envisioned by Richards, might be contrasted with the cognitive experience of reading a work that “holds the reader’s attention,” even a very long work. The question here is not whether such attention is

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possible for the hyper attentive—the popularity of the Harry Potter novels suggests that it has not disappeared—but whether it is commutable to other artifacts, such as novels by Dickens. The evidence for commutability is difficult to gather, however, and the failure of commutability is much harder to explain. For example, we would have to account for the ways in which the Harry Potter novels differ from those of Dickens, a question that would precipitate us into great cultural perplexities, especially given the fact that Dickens had no problem holding the attention of his contemporary readers. Also, duration of attention is not always equivalent to depth of attention. The opposition between hyper and deep solicits further inquiry along these lines.

For the present, however, let me set this question aside and concur tentatively with Hayles when she says that there has been an erosion of deep attention and that this erosion has created a problem for the literary curriculum. Whatever we mean by deep attention in this context has immediately to do with reading, and fundamentally with reading as a learned cognitive skill (what was called an art in antiquity). I am not speaking here of basic literacy, what teachers of reading in the primary schools call decoding. Nor am I speaking of reading in many everyday contexts. Reading too can be the occasion of an ephemeral and hyper mode of cognition, as in the reading that goes into a text message—as exemplary an instance of new communication as anything in our media universe. If reading is implicated in Hayles's deep attention, it must at least broach the threshold of reading closely, whether or not it conforms to the disciplinary technique of close reading formerly (and still?) prevalent in literary studies. Hayles would surely agree that the technique of close reading depends on the deep mode of attention, however we define it. If our educational institutions should fail to produce the desired synergy between deep and hyper attention, then the story of this failure might indeed be written as an epilogue for close reading. Hayles does not intend to write such an epilogue—quite the contrary—but her argument gives us an invaluable set of terms for understanding the cognitive foundation on which close reading is built up as a practice. I suggest that this way of thinking about close reading is more helpful at the moment than other attempts to write its epilogue deliberately, such as Franco Moretti's argument for "distant reading" (57).

In my remarks thus far, I have veered from the intradisciplinary questions of interest to Moretti and allied myself with Hayles's broader cultural concerns. For Hayles, the general relevance of the distinction between deep and hyper attention is confirmed by the universal pertinence of her psychological vocabulary, principally represented by the term *attention*. Reading is understood uncontroversially as a form of attention. Her concept of attention straddles ordinary usage and a possible, though never fully elaborated, psychology of media consumption. Such a psychology would have to account for our relations to all media, including all writing, both literary and nonliterary. The concept of attention is massively burdened by its psychological associations, but I want to pursue now its somewhat cryptic relation to the disciplinary technique of close reading—first by looking more critically at Hayles's use of the term and then by tracking the term back to Richards's deployment of it at the very moment of the prologue to close reading.

As teachers we are continuously concerned with attention; it is what we demand of students, and what they sometimes pay us. Attention is psychological money for

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teachers, and without it we are poor. The attention concept has a still more specific domain of reference for teachers of literature, who typically associate close reading with it in some special way. In the most common and least technical formulation, close reading means paying attention to the words on the page.

In Hayles's argument, the concept of attention is distributed between the two modes of deep and hyper—both positive concepts for Hayles—which are in turn linked to the distinction between older cultural works (a novel by Dickens) and new media. Her deployment of the distinction is empirically strong in some respects but weak in others. In support of the ascendancy of hyper attention, she cites the Kaiser Family Foundation Report of 2005, entitled *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year-Olds* (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout). This report by no means celebrates the triumph of hyper attention, but it refrains from polemicizing against new media. Still, it lends credence to the thesis of another, more controversial study (not cited by Hayles) done by the NEA in 2004, entitled *Reading at Risk*, which sounds an alarm about the decline of literary reading in our society, especially among young people. The *Generation M* study is more carefully framed than the NEA report, but its findings do not allay the anxiety expressed in *Reading at Risk*. The researchers for the Kaiser Foundation discovered that members of Generation M spend about 6.5 hours a day engaged with all media, including print. But traditional print forms such as novels, journals, and newspapers account for only .43 hours of this time expenditure. (These numbers are cited by Hayles in her essay.) If engagement with new media fosters hyper attention at the expense of deep attention, Hayles responds to the consequent social anxiety by defending hyper attention as an adaptive necessity. But she must argue her case here against some powerful empirical counterevidence, for example, in connection with multitasking, perhaps the most exemplary expression of hyper attention. Many studies show, as Hayles acknowledges, that multitasking degrades the performance of component individual tasks. Recent laws against texting while driving are based on these empirical studies.

The evidence for regarding hyper attention as maladaptive in some circumstances is great. Hayles has a bold strategy for overcoming this problem: she takes up the most pathologized form of this cognitive mode, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and rehabilitates it as the basis for a psychology of hyper attention that shows how it benefits individuals and society. Because I rather admire the boldness of this move, I hasten to admit that I cannot do it justice in my remarks. Hayles argues that ADHD may mark the first generation of a virtually new kind of human being (191). By means of this almost science fictional hypothesis, the pathology of attention deficit is converted into a new cognitive skill, hyper attention, which is asserted to be more adaptive than its predecessor because it is more able to handle an environment that is now saturated with media stimuli. The crucial change in the environment is precisely the fact of new media; it converts ADHD, analogized to a genetic mistake, into an adaptation.

The reservation I raise first is that if Hayles's argument rests ultimately on an appeal to evolutionary biology, it relies proximately on a psychological model that is surprisingly not new: stimulus-response. The concept of attention draws along with it an unelaborated stimulus-response model of interaction between mind and world.

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At this point I move abruptly away from Hayles in order to glance briefly at the prologue to close reading, the work of Richards. In his two great works of the 1920s, *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism*, Richards constructed a psychology of reading on the foundation of the stimulus-response model emerging in Russia by Ivan Pavlov, in the United States by John Watson, and in Britain by Charles Sherrington, author of *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*, the work that strongly influenced Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism*. This scientific or perhaps quasi-scientific origin of close reading is often forgotten in current accounts of our disciplinary practices, but it is worth recalling when an epilogue to close reading turns out to be written in the same terms as the prologue. Recall the context in which Richards was theorizing. He was hired at Cambridge to teach English literature, a relatively new subject at Cambridge and still suffering from a lack of legitimacy. The field of English was claimed at the time by several quite incompatible parties, the philologists and literary historians on the one side, the belletrists on the other. Members of the former party dominated the discipline and tended to view their scholarship as a version of science, on the model of German *Wissenschaft*. The belletrists were closer to literary journalists, very well educated but vehemently opposed to the scientific pretensions of their philological colleagues and indeed to scientific culture in general. Although Richards was hired by a noted proponent of belletrism, Arthur Quiller-Couch, he was not disposed to regard science with the animus of the belletrists. On the other hand, he did not hold the philologists in great esteem, seeing them as having evaded the problem of judgment, in his view the greatest cultural problem of modernity. His theory puts forward a third way for disciplining literary study.

Richards understood his task in teaching Cambridge undergraduates as the training of their literary judgment, which he hoped to put on a surer, scientific footing. The faculty of judgment is what he meant by the term “literary criticism” in the *Principles of Literary Criticism*. But judgment, he argued, depended on an underlying cognitive potentiality, which is the focusing of attention in reading. In the famous protocol experiment recorded in his successor volume, *Practical Criticism*, he demonstrated that his students were poor judges of literature because they were poor readers. They were distracted from the poem on the page by irrelevant associations, or what he called stock responses. Their mode of reading succumbed to the supervision of crude environmental stimuli on the subtler and more complex signals emanating from the literary text. At base, then, the problem of reading could be understood as a matter of attention, of devising tactics for overcoming the “inattentive activity” of our “ordinary reading” (297). For this purpose Richards found the psychology of stimulus and response indispensable. Reading could be analyzed as a form of attention, very much what Hayles calls “deep attention,” a term that we can recognize now as rooted both in the practice of close reading and in the stimulus-response psychology on which close reading was based.

Richards’s recourse to psychology was enormously consequential, not the least for the little spatial trope that pervaded his work and was later elevated into a disciplinary term of art: close reading. To quote only one of many instances in which this descriptor appears in *Practical Criticism*: “All respectable poetry invites close reading” (195). Still, this term is not yet in Richards’s work the same as what we mean by close



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reading in the disciplinary sense, the sense that governs the development of the discipline between the moments of prologue and epilogue. Richards notoriously offered no positive methodology of reading, only a set of tactics for removing the sources of misreading. The development of positive interpretive techniques came later, with the New Criticism and after. Recalling this point forces us to see the gap between the psychology of reading and reading as a disciplinary practice, the gap that permits us to forget Richards's psychology of reading, to forget that the prologue to close reading crucially involves the question of attention, the very psychological problematic we have seen reemerge in our time, the age of attention deficit disorder.

But this echo is more sounding, even deeper, than I have intimated thus far. For Richards the cause of misreading was unquestionably an earlier version of what Hayles calls hyper attention—or, rather, the purely negative version of what she welcomes as a new cognitive skill. The source was the same: new media. We do not see this connection right away because Richards linked the question of attention less to the distinction between writing and other media than to the difference between the high modernist conception of literature and its mass cultural antagonists, whatever their medial form. He argues typically in *Principles of Literary Criticism*:

People do not much imitate what they see upon the screen or what they read in best-sellers. It would matter little if they did. Such effects would show themselves clearly and the evil would be of a manageable kind. They tend instead to develop stock attitudes and stereotyped ideas of producers: attitudes and ideas which can be "put across" quickly through a medium that lends itself to crude rather than sensitive handling. (231)

Setting to one side the sonorous elitism of this statement, which so offends contemporary sensibilities, we might hear instead Richards's struggle to understand a continuum within medial proliferation, the link, for example, between the screen and best-sellers—not a simple matter then, and not now. The complexity arises from the highly charged relations among media, which are competitive but also imitative, in either case tending to generate more media.

We must note, then, a certain inaccuracy in the notion of a generation M. It would be more faithful to the history of media to say that Richards was already confronting a media generation, a generation  $M_1$ , and that Hayles is considering a later generation,  $M_2$  or possibly even some later iteration. Richards sees his generation as already overwhelmed by a saturated media environment, buffeted by stimuli that produce conditioned responses supervening even on those modernist literary works intended to challenge the conditioned response. So he observes in *Practical Criticism* that "those who are discovering for the first time that poetry can cause them emotion do often, for this very reason, pay little attention to the poetry" (248). This sentence still stands up well as a description of how difficult it is to teach close reading to those who have never been asked to read in this way—that is, with what Hayles calls deep attention.

It would in my view be better not to blame the difficulty of reading literature today on new media, or on nonliterary writing. Media of themselves do not produce responses of a single, inexorably determined kind. On the contrary, close reading, if it means anything, holds out the possibility that deep attention can be paid to

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nearly any cultural artifact, even those that seek to impose a stock response on us. Conversely, much of what we mean now by close reading involves, as we all know, resistance to the seductions of the literary work itself, even the great work. In the meantime, we need to disabuse ourselves of the notion that there is an inherent conflict between literature and the new media and that this conflict can be posed as the difference between deep attention and hyper attention, whether we conceive the latter negatively or positively. Literature is a medium too. The attention we pay to literary works is whatever we want to pay to them, or what we are able to pay, or what we have learned to pay. It is only partly, I suggest, a question of what we owe to these works, though to many we certainly owe our deepest, undivided attention. Our attention is distinct from the work, a cognitive potentiality worth cultivating for its own sake. Richards would have endorsed this view, and surely Hayles does too.

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