Rereading the New Criticism

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"A Kind of Dual Attentiveness"

Close Reading after the New Criticism

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THE NEW CRITICISM is a school of thought now so old that it seems oddly anachronistic to discuss it in relation to contemporary reading practices. The dominant mode for literary analysis and the teaching of literature in North American post-secondary contexts from the 1930s until well into the 1970s, the New Criticism fell radically out of favor during the so-called theory wars of the last three decades of the twentieth century, when the discipline of English appeared to fracture along a line between "new," theoretically situated, historically contextualized critique and "old," putatively ahistorical analysis, which focused on language and form as it produces meaning in texts outside of—or without regard to—temporal and contextual referents. The New Criticism was justly accused of being myopic in its disposition to situate "universal" meanings not only without reference to cultural specificities, but also in the form and language of poetry largely written by white male writers; it thus acted as a primary factor in the formation of a canon whose aesthetic criteria excluded everyone else. As a result, while the New Criticism constituted a radical and invigorating school of thought in the early to mid-twentieth century (it was demonstrably new in relation to the late-nineteenth-century historicist approaches to reading it contested), by the last quarter of the century it had become a substantial impediment to development within a discipline no longer dominated—or, at any rate, less dominated—by white male academics.
Close reading, the New Criticism’s primary gesture and most significant legacy, worked precisely against the kind of situated reading that characterizes theorized analysis. Because, that is, it is a practice of reading that attends to the ways in which a text produces values in relation to itself, as a more or less autonomous object that can be detached from its author and from the circumstances of its production, close reading did not lend itself well to late-twentieth-century investigations, for instance, of the conditions of authorship: the ways in which marginalized constituencies use language; the extent to which literature is imbricated in the reproduction of systems of power; and the social and political work of representation. Indeed it did not lend itself to any ideologically situated critique of literature undertaken in the necessary late-twentieth-century return to the foundations of an academy that, given the continued gaps between academic salaries along the lines of race and gender, proved an uneasy intellectual home for scholars “outside,” as Spivak famously put it, “in the teaching machine.”

Within an academic discipline that itself foundationally and pervasively reproduced a system of social and political inequity, then, the New Criticism and its practice of close reading came to be understood as instruments for maintaining that system. In some late-twentieth-century debates about the destructive implications for English studies of race theory, feminist critique, postcolonialism, queer, class, cultural, and popular culture studies, close reading came to be represented by scholars outside the theory camp as the whipping boy of various leftist agendas. But the New Criticism and its practices were not simply and arbitrarily destroyed like the art of a deposed regime by bloodthirsty revolutionaries. Rather, as a school of thought that provided no strategies for assessing the social and political determinants in the production of language in specific contexts at specific times, the New Criticism really did function as what Audre Lorde would describe in 1979 as “the master’s tools” (331).

Thus if exclusionary, male-dominated, and patriarchal scholarship characterized English studies during the first three quarters of the twentieth century and accordingly comprised what Lorde calls the “master’s house,” New Critical close reading could not be particularly useful to the work of dismantling that house—in the field of English, the university, and more widely. The New Criticism’s role in an unequal workplace had to be assessed, and its effects on the discipline had to be addressed. As Jane Gallop suggests, “The time was ripe for . . . a course correction: ahistoricism had been persuasively linked to sexism, racism, and elitism; attacks on the canon had called into question the notion of timeless works; literary studies had been ahistorical for too long” (181).
By the end of the 1970s, close reading, under pressure from what were often represented as “special interest groups” (constituencies rendered “special” by virtue of their exclusion from the dominant category, most often through “differences” in gender, race, or sexuality), had largely vanished from classrooms and the analysis of literature. At any rate, it had ceased to function as the core of the discipline’s training and critique—even to be acknowledged a valued practice. Close reading, as Terry Eagleton observes became “[l]ike thatching or clog dancing, . . . a dying art” (1), a vestige of the New Criticism that had, by then, as Frank Lentricchia puts it, met its “official” demise (xiii). No longer taught, no longer studied, no longer accorded any authority in the analysis of literature, the New Criticism was “dead”—as Lentricchia suggests, “an imposing and repressive father-figure” (xiii)—brought to its end through an act that might be understood, as Jonathan Arac has likewise intimated, as a kind of disciplinary “parricide” (347). The often vitriolic late-twentieth-century debates about whether theory or close reading was the better system for teaching and interpretation and about whether or not the New Criticism was really more historically engaged or less focused on the text as an autonomous artifact than it appeared to be gradually faded, displaced by other debates. With only a few exceptions—for instance, Lentricchia’s volume, *After the New Criticism* (1980); Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker’s 1985 collection, *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (1985); Mark Jancovich’s study, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (1993)—hardly anyone mentioned the New Criticism in a direct and sustained way, indicated much concern with its demise, or mourned the loss of what Parker describes as its “program” (11–12).

Now, however, as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, many academics have begun to reconsider the function of this school of thought as it pertains to critical practice and to pedagogy, with particular reference to close reading. Such reconsideration underpins recent analysis of the New Critical moment, such as that of Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia in their 2003 edited volume, *Close Reading: The Reader; Caroline Levine in a 2006 essay in Victorian Studies* (“Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies”); Stephen Schryer in a discussion in *PMLA* in 2007 (“Fantasies of the New Class: The New Criticism, Harvard Sociology, and the Idea of the University”); Andrew DuBois in a consideration of ethics, critics, and close reading in *University of Toronto Quarterly* in the same year; Garrick Davis, founder of the *Contemporary Poetry Review*, in an anthology of New Criticism titled *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*; as well as many others, including, of course, the authors in this volume. Moreover, critics notably not associated with New
Critical practices, such as Gayatri Spivak (“Close Reading”) and Jane Gallop (“The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading”), have called for a review of the work of close reading. Marjorie Levinson has weighed in with an extensive review of current writing on or within what she designates “the New Formalism,” which aims, as she puts it, “to recover for teaching and scholarship in English some version of their traditional address to aesthetic form” (559).  

Eric Savoy has made a case for what he calls “Queer Formalism.” Perhaps most unexpectedly, in 2007 Terry Eagleton published How to Read a Poem, suggesting the importance for readers (of poetry, specifically) of attending to matters of form and language (“Tone, Mood and Pitch,” “Syntax, Grammar and Punctuation,” “Rhythm and Metre”) historically associated with the domain of what I. A. Richards in 1929 called “Practical Criticism” rather than with ideologically situated analysis.

Given the emergence of the majority of these discussions of close reading from such contexts as feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonial critique, queer theory, and Marxism, it cannot be suggested that there are many academics who advocate a full-scale return to a school of thought whose time has come and gone, and in whose recession from classrooms and scholarly inquiry many still active in the profession were involved. Professional equity along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality has certainly not been fully achieved, and salary and promotion gaps between nonvisible-minority men and visible-minority women are still acutely evident across North American universities; and if New Critical practices can be understood to be implicated in creating these gaps, it is hard to make a case for taking them up again. Moreover, although in English studies, old exclusionary canons have been largely displaced as structuring principles for course syllabi and programs of research, dominance and marginality still obtain in many textbooks, anthologies, and areas of inquiry throughout the discipline. Thus the need to maintain pressure on the practices that demonstrably reproduced and reinforced the patriarchal academy continues to exist; and it is doubtful that any of the critics cited above, whatever their theoretical affiliations, could be accused of leading a retro-guard to restore a system whose unsituated formal analysis serves as index of the academy’s inequities.

Nonetheless, these critics, along with many others, are making a collective and increasingly urgent call for some version of the old New Critical practice of attending to form and language, and, in particular, to return to teaching the “art” of close reading. Like Gallop, they argue that close reading was “the most valuable thing English ever had to offer” (183) and like Savoy, “invite the fainthearted formalists to overcome their embarrassment...
and institutional abjection” (80) and return to doing what they used to do. “Forward,” as Eagleton puts it, “to antiquity!” (16).

If there is not, in fact, a rearguard plot to reaffirm patriarchy in the university (as some feminists have suggested there is in the various performances of “backlash” since the early 1980s), then the rationale for the call to close reading is obscure. Why do so many scholars want close reading back? What has been lost with its eradication from scholarship and classrooms? What will be gained with its reinstatement? How is what happens in English studies now less than it was before—before theory, before new historicisms, before situated, archive-based critique? And, most importantly, what conditions in the discipline and the academy are indicated by the desire to return to close reading? The university, Bill Readings suggested a decade ago, is palpably “in ruins”; disciplines across the academy are charting decline; apocalyptic reports of imminent disappearance, diminishing value, and disciplinary fragmentation proliferate, in English studies and elsewhere. The New Criticism “died” a long time ago; more recently the discipline has seen not only the “end of reading” (Eagleton, 1) but the “death” of theory itself—or, at any rate, as Jonathan Culler suggests, widespread reports of its death (Culler, 1). The disciplinary moment symptomized by the call for a return to close reading, then, is characterized by postness: “after the New Criticism” (Len-tricchia, 1980), “after theory” (Eagleton, 2003), poststructuralist, -modern, -colonial, -feminist, and -human, what, as a 2003 Readers’ Forum in English Studies in Canada (ESC) asked, is “left of English studies”? What do we study? How do we teach it? And, crucially, how do we train others to do the work of the discipline?

The ESC Forum and many other such investigations, in tandem with the broad call for a return to close readings, suggest that the discipline of English, if not in ruins, is broadly aware of an identity crisis. Unlike the situation in the seventies and eighties, however, the current crisis is an effect less of political infighting or ongoing contests of margin versus center than of decentering itself, both as it involves repositioning what had been marginalized in relation to the dominant and as it signifies a gap at the core of disciplinary identity. Although the proliferation of disciplinary self-analysis in this first decade of the twenty-first century has yielded a substantial catalogue of concerns pertaining to the profession (what it is, what we do, why it matters), what is at the heart of this discussion across all its categories—what defines the gap—is what used to be called literature. Evident in discussions of the state of the discipline is an intuition that what has been lost is a coherent, collective, and, if always conditionally and provisionally, shared idea of the object of disciplinary study. The focus of English studies has become unclear, shifting over
the past twenty-five years from literature through text across a range of discursive registers to a kind of studies that are sometimes Cultural Studies and sometimes just culturally situated, and not necessarily textual or language-based at all. Literature, it might be argued, is no longer the focus of English studies.

In fact, we, if there is any kind of first-person plural subject at all, do not teach what used to be called literature, but instead a range of cultural documents and practices that function not so much to demonstrate to students the lineaments and terms of “English” as a discernible disciplinary body but rather the extent to which what used to be called literature operates across disciplinary boundaries and is comprehensible not through the study of literature itself but through the lenses and positions of theoretical tools and systems that are mobilized in many disciplines. Accordingly, sociologists, historians, musicologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and English scholars might all “use” the same references to explore and articulate values in the material they study and teach. Although, as Terry Eagleton rightly observes, it is “one of the great myths or unexamined clichés of contemporary critical debate” that close reading was “destroyed” by “theory, with its soulless abstractions and vacuous generalities” (1), it is true, as Culler points out, that theory breaks down disciplinary boundaries. If we understand theory, as Culler defines it, “as work that succeeds in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those in which it originates” (3), then it is, as he suggests, “inescapably interdisciplinary” (4) and minimizes distinctions between disciplines—at the level both of “approach” or methodology and of the object of inquiry. This effect is certainly evident in English, as scholars find themselves in a location that is still nominally identified as a discipline while becoming increasingly undifferentiated from other disciplines by methods and objects of analysis. While there is not necessarily any loss in this configuration—scholarship is unquestionably enriched by the movement of ideas across disciplinary boundaries—the effect for English studies, perhaps uniquely in the academy, has been a demonstrable diminishment in its engagement with its former object of inquiry, as well as of the disciplinary sense of what that object is. What has been lost is a shared sense of literature: what it is and why it matters.

In many ways, what there is to study in English is much more than was there before: the political critique of the literary that informed the theory-driven canon wars in the late twentieth century stretched the boundaries of “literature” to include writing by women and marginalized categories, non-English or colonial English and sometimes translated texts, nonliterary genres, print culture, and non-language-based symbolic systems and media.
It also gave rise to new canon of key theoretical, philosophical, historical, and scientific commentary that would constitute the groundwork of critique in English as in other disciplines. In other ways, however, interdisciplinary boundary-crossing has meant that this terrain is wide open and not the “property” of English studies. That is, if literature is not to be differentiated from any other kind of cultural production, the point of a discipline whose purpose is the study of literature becomes unclear. Anybody in English studies can read anything across any disciplinary terrain, and, indeed, can bring that reading to research and teaching as the knowledge in relation to which any text or process signifies; conversely, anybody equipped with the same theoretical toolbox can read literature and situate it in relation to the cultural context it reproduces, with and in relation to other documents and processes doing related work. English studies might thus be seen to have expanded to become, in one sense, everything, while in another, to have diminished into nothing.

Thus what is at stake in the current discussion of close reading is what close reading functioned to define and validate—both literature and the profession of literary studies. On the one hand, the question “What’s left of English studies?” speaks to the problem of a discipline whose identity in the academy has been mystified; on the other hand, to the problem of literature itself as an identifiable, distinct, and meaningful element in of the field of cultural production; as a mode of discourse whose characteristics differentiate it from other kinds of discursive production and merit, if not problematic placement above other kinds of cultural production, at least attention to what it does and how it does it. The current conversation invites discipline-specific methodologies, practices of analysis that attend to the work itself and not only, as in some historicized or situated readings, its function as evidence or “symptom” of systems in which it is implicated. The call for a return to close reading is thus a call for English studies to define itself again with reference to what it is that English studies studies—just as it was for the New Critics, who undertook to “redefine the literary institution and its claim to professional status” (Jancovich, 144).

Gallop notes that it was the New Criticism and close reading that transformed studies in English from “a gentlemanly practice of amateur history” or what Searle describes as “the genteel cultivation of taste and sentiment” (528) into a profession (183): “We became a discipline, so the story goes, when we stopped being armchair historians and became instead painstaking close readers” (183). By this logic, without a definable, teachable methodology such as close reading, we are in danger of losing disciplinary identity. Indeed, Gallop suggests, we are in danger of becoming a “practice of amateur
history” all over again: “While,” she argues, “today’s literary historians with their leftist leanings and insistence on understanding literature in a generally cultural and especially political context are hardly gentlemanly, still I fear they are—despite their archival work—amateurs. Certainly that is what our colleagues in history think” (183). In other words, according to Gallop, the archival and historical turn in English studies, while crucial to redefining the discipline and working toward forms of equality in the academy, has not only blurred the boundaries of the discipline but brought it back to much the condition in which the New Critics found it early in the early twentieth century when they developed a system of reading that would address the specificity and function of literature.

Although the New Critics were often accused of making the analysis of literature too “scientific,” the effect of “practical criticism” was in many ways to affirm not the value of the discipline as an enterprise that is like science, but at a fundamental level the value of literature as cultural production. The New Critical canon registered the pervasively patriarchal structures—socially and of course also in the context of the university—from which close reading emerged; and New Critical analysis, obscuring the social and political circumstances in which authors and readers are imbricated, inevitably reproduced that patriarchal structure. But as Jancovich argues, the New Critics stressed that [literature or] the aesthetic was not inherently separate from human activity, but a form which should be fully integrated with all activities; that it should be established within a way of living that had acknowledged, and come to terms with, human nature. As a result, their literary criticism was not a form of scientism, but developed out of a reaction against positivist concepts of science. (144)

What Stephen Schryer describes as “the discipline’s specialized techne” not only worked to “make criticism more scientific—that is, more predictable and rigorous” (665), but also “distinguish[ed literary texts],” Searle suggests, “from other texts or other uses of language (particularly scientific language)” (528). The New Critical sense of literature, in other words, is that the ways in which humans negotiate language in texts whose function is artistic or aesthetic constitutes a vital area of scholarly inquiry, and, moreover, that the criticism of literary texts is a meaningful “form of activity itself” (Jancovich, 144), not so much because it elucidates cultural events or the circumstances conditioning an author’s performance of identity but because it enables consideration of the text’s own negotiation of language processes and attention
to how constructions in form and language speak to and engage with contemporary moments.

The New Criticism thus both “redefined the profession of English” (Jancovich, 138) and reaffirmed the importance of literature as a human activity that merits systematic study. Its processes can be identified and named; its effects traced through analysis. Its negotiation of language to investigate complex and contradictory responses to environment, experience, and identity can be understood to be sufficiently complex to justify sustained, rigorous analysis. If, that is, the ways in which humans engage through language with the conditions that language both represents and constitutes is meaningful, then the systematic analysis of its meanings is also meaningful.

It is this kind of idealism that motivated the New Criticism and its work to develop a discipline dedicated to the study of literature. It is likewise this kind of idealism that motivates the current wave of critics calling for a return to close reading. The problem confronting these critics, however, is twofold. On the one hand is the question of the literary itself, and the problem of affirming the value of this form of human engagement in and with language without reconstructing old hierarchies separating “art” from other cultural work and “high” from “low” art. On the other is the problem of the New Criticism as an apparatus that simultaneously affirms through its practice of close reading the specificity of literature as a form of cultural production and reproduces a system within which the conditions of textual production and circulation are not considered as factors in the ways in which literature signifies. The problem, in other words, is how to reaffirm the literary without undermining the crucial late-twentieth-century expansion of the literary (and the aesthetic) beyond a male-dominated, Anglocentric, white canon of specific texts and particular genres and without undoing the expansion of the discipline as workplace and intellectual home for scholars whose marginality has only recently and tenuously been redressed. The problem is, in effect, how to dislodge the historicism that, in the view of scholars such as Gallop, has turned English studies away from the textual production of meaning to a consideration of its function, as Culler puts it, as “a symptom, whose causes are to be found in historical reality” (9)—and, importantly, how to do this without disarticulating analysis from history. The question is how to integrate close reading with social and political critique.

Jancovich maintains that the New Critics did undertake such an integrated practice, making “the critique of modern society the centre of their argument and approach” (144). By the same token, Eagleton argues that close reading has in fact always informed the practice of what he describes, in a kind of Arnoldian swerve, as “the twentieth century’s towering literary
scholars,” for whom, he suggests, “there is a politics implicit in the painstaking investigation of the literary text” (8–9); and Culler holds that “formalism does not involve a denial of history, as is sometimes claimed” and that “it is precisely because language is historical through and through . . . that we must relate any linguistic event to the synchronic system from which it emerges” (9–10). But the fact remains that the New Criticism represents a problematic, exclusionary, and deeply biased notion of the literary and of the discipline, and that the New Criticism did not consider the historical as an integral factor the work of close reading—as contemporary critics suggest that any “new” practice of close reading must do.

In the current project of defining a disciplinary practice, Levinson describes a “new formalism” that takes up a “project of cultivating ‘a historically informed formalist criticism’” (559). Caroline Levine, meanwhile, traces a movement toward what she calls “strategic formalism,” a culturally situated method premised on the idea that “literary forms do not merely reflect social relationships but may help bring them into being” (625) and that demonstrates how “literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formation, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them” (626). And Eagleton observes what he calls “a kind of dual attentiveness: to the grain and texture of literary works, and to those works’ cultural contexts” (8). Such gestures, Levine suggests, do not disregard the cultural as a central location for the production of meaning, but emphasize it; they do not, Eagleton holds, diminish “the critic’s social and political responsibilities” (16) but compellingly affirm them; they do not, Gallop suggests, return to what has often been seen in relation to New Critical practices (as it was for the philologically and historically oriented models of English studies prior to the New Criticism) as an authoritarian model of reading and teaching, but revitalize what she describes as “our most effective antiauthoritarian pedagogy” (185).

None of these critics proposes a reduction of the expanded literary field of the late twentieth century; what they all do propose, however, is a method, inspired by the methods of the New Criticism, that makes it possible to see cultural texts not necessarily as autonomous objects but nonetheless as works that generate their own meanings through the organization and particular use of language, not detached from social and political contexts or histories, but equally not detached from symbolic practice. What close reading thus seems to mean as it is represented by scholars calling for its return, is a not a de-emphasis of content per se (although, Gallop recommends teaching course materials with less reference to extradisciplinary and already established knowledge that must be given to students as context for understanding
a text), but an emphasis of form as itself a symbolic practice and, as Fredric Jameson suggests, itself ideological. Caroline Levine draws attention to Jameson’s “attention to the ideology of form as an effort to grasp the ‘symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production’” (Jameson, qtd. in Levine, 625). Where the “dually attentive” practice of close reading that is tentatively identified as “new formalism” and “strategic formalism” differs from the older New Critical practice is precisely in its understanding of form as it produces values.

Formal practices have of course been productively charted over the discipline’s history and formed the basis of New Critical analysis of rhetoric, narrative, genre, poetic meter and poetic form, structure, and figure. They represent what Eagleton describes as “the grain and texture of literary works.” To consider them is thus to affirm “the literary”; to situate them in relation to “works’ cultural contexts” is to affirm the extent to which literature—albeit an expansive and flexible category—is also distinct from cultural production generally. It is not that literature is more or less important than other kinds of writing and symbolic representation, but it does produce effects in language and sign systems in different ways. If disciplinary identity and distinctness matter, and if literature is the lost object of English studies and the thing sought in the impulse to return to close reading, then recognizing and engaging with those differences matters too.

There is always a danger in fundamentalism: this has been as evident in what Savoy describes as “the self-perpetuating circularity of raceclassgender” (80) or what Gallop suggests is the authority of historicism as it once was in New Critical practices of insisting on the autonomy and discrete form of the literary text. There is thus a clear danger in arguing for a critical practice necessary to the survival of the discipline. The point, however, is not necessarily to articulate an imperative with regard to the specifics of what we teach and study, nor to construct factions across the battlefield of the text and its interpretation (theorized close reading versus theory without close reading; literary versus nonliterary), but rather to continue to develop understanding of how what we teach and study shapes the discipline in which we work and the social structures we inhabit. The recent interest in returning to close reading in the context of ideologically situated criticism and in relation to the conditions of the academy might most compellingly indicate that the problems evident in the New Critical moment, while lessened, have not altogether disappeared. These systemic problems may well be similarly reproduced to some degree in a discipline organized around history and theory. If historicism and theory have not produced an academic ecosystem that has
managed to move beyond the terms of the dominant and the marginal and is radically more equitable than that which characterized the New Critical moment, then there is still work to be done—the work of dually attentive close reading.

Notes

1. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993). With regard to continued inequity in the academic workplace, see, for instance, the data published by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences (CFHSS) in 2006, which indicates that in Canadian universities in 2001 the salaries of nonvisible-minority women represent 68.9% and those of visible-minority women 55.4% of those of nonvisible-minority men. Statistics related to hiring and promotion in Canada in the first decade of the twentieth century are similar to widely published records in the US: in 2003 women, 59% of graduating students, comprise 31.7% of university teachers; First Nations, people with disabilities, and visible minorities represent, collectively, 22.5% of university teachers. Women occupy 29.9% of the highest ranking positions at American universities and 18.1% at Canadian universities (2003). See “Feminist and Equity Audits 2006” <www.fedcan.ca/english/pdf/issues/FEEAuditpostcardEng.pdf>.

2. Parker outlines the New Critical “program of treating the literary text as an isolated artifact or object, dismissing concern with author’s intention and reader’s response, and the tenet of the text’s organic wholeness, its reconciliation of tension or diversity into unity” (11–12).

3. Levinson’s essay provides an important overview of current criticism engaged with questions of form and formal analysis across a range of fields.


5. See, for instance, Spivak on comparative literature in *Death of a Discipline* (2003).


Bibliography


