Rereading the New Criticism
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As we enter a new millennium, our experiences of reading, once chiefly associated with the printed page, have undergone radical changes. Given the recent proliferation in our culture of digital text and hypertext, a dizzying array of new social media, storage devices, and e-readers, all of which present verbal text in new forms, we are increasingly prompted to take stock of our habitual reading practices and how they need to be adapted to new modes of transmission. We encounter verbal text on the web, in text messages, updates on Facebook, and blog posts. Accordingly, contemporary culture is proving fertile ground for the reconsideration of reading practices—and within literary studies, for a reevaluation of the approaches to reading associated with the New Criticism, suspicion of which for many years served as a kind of disciplinary shibboleth. In recent years, methods of close reading in particular have been increasingly invoked as they bear not only upon the category of “literature” but also on a much wider range of verbal text in various media, as well as on the semiotics of cultural texts more broadly.¹

In “The historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,” Jane Gallop laments what she perceives as a decline during the late 1980s and 1990s in literary studies of methods of close reading that have, in her view, provided the most valuable skills that the field offers. Even during the first days of “high theory” in the late 1970s and 1980s, when those committed to new currents in theory were refusing the “elitism” and
“ahistoricism” of the New Criticism, approaches such as deconstruction in
many respects carried on careful close readings whose maneuvers were very
much indebted to the New Criticism. By the turn of the century, however,
she notes, New Historicism and other historicizing approaches—at least as
widely practiced—had contributed to a decline of close reading. And by this,
Gallop means what most contemporary commentators who note the wan-
ing of close reading usually mean: the general assumption is that what close
reading “reads” is, broadly speaking, aesthetic form. As Marjorie Levinson
has recently noted, certainly the founders of New Historicism, themselves
deeply invested in close reading, were not responsible for this trend; Thomas
Laqueur likewise notes that the “new historicism, at least in its Berkeley ver-
sion, engaged passionately with what are traditionally taken to be formalist
questions” (50). But later New Historicist and related work was often read
as displacing the emphasis on close reading for form with historical research.
As Gallop observes, by 2000, archival work was regarded as paramount for
jobseekers in the field, and many students were emerging from doctoral pro-
grams in literary studies without skills in close reading.

Gallop contends that if, in the name of removing from literary studies
the dimensions of New Critical work with which we no longer want to be
associated, we also jettison close reading, we lose an approach that has not
only been crucial to the formation of the discipline of literary studies, but that
is what we, distinctively, have to offer, both to our field and to neighboring
disciplines. Insofar as it promotes active learning and empowers students to
assert claims based on evidence they themselves can find, Gallop maintains
that close reading provides our best defense against authoritarian, top-down
forms of pedagogy. Like many others in the field today—Paglia, Graff, Eagle-
ton, as well as those such as Heather Dubrow, Susan Wolfson, and Charles
Altieri whom Levinson associates with the “New Formalism”—Gallop calls
for a reinvigoration of close reading.

Such appeals have clearly constituted a major impetus for this volume.
Likewise forming an important point of departure for the project and under-
scoring the importance of the historically reevaluative work undertaken by
its essays is recent attention to a related phenomenon that Sharon Marcus
and Stephen Best term “surface reading.” In the introduction to “The Way
We Read Now,” their special issue of Representations published in fall 2009,
Best and Marcus highlight this set of allied interpretive practices as playing a
fundamental role in the “way we read now.” Surface reading responds to an
interpretive practice (which, following Fredric Jameson, they call “symptom-
atic reading”) that has held significant sway over literary–critical practices
since the 1970s, when New Criticism faded from the scene and the “meta-
McIntyre and Hickman, “Toward a New Close Reading”  ·  233

languages” of psychoanalysis and Marxism began to exert significant influence. This approach entails what Paul Ricoeur dubbed a hermeneutics of suspicion—i.e., proceeding with skepticism about what texts apparently present—and reads texts for latent content: manifest content is read as merely “symptomatic” of a deeper underlying logic, narrative, or ideology that waits to be uncovered by the discerning, “heroic” critic. As Best and Marcus have it, “when symptomatic readers focus on elements in the text, they construe them as symbolic of something latent or concealed” (3). According to Jameson, the “strong” critic has to “unmask” the text and “restore” to “the surface the history that the text represses.”

By contrast, the essays gathered in “The Way We Read Now” feature recent critical approaches that depart from such symptomatic reading and turn, in some cases return, to varieties of “surface reading”—which involve attending to, interpreting, and evaluating what is evident in texts, rather than assuming that their most important dimensions are to be derived from distrusting what the textual surface suggests and exposing hidden depths. Among the contemporary varieties of surface reading they note, Best and Marcus highlight a practice of close reading that derives from the New Criticism, which focuses on revealing the “linguistic density” and ‘verbal complexity’ of literary texts” (10). More generally, surface reading involves a “willed, sustained proximity to the text,” directly reminiscent of the “aims of the New Criticism, which insisted that the key to a text’s meaning lay within the text itself, particularly in its formal properties” (10).

Animating the project of Rereading the New Criticism is an argument that Best and Marcus do not address but that their comments imply: that today’s reinvigorated forms of close and surface reading can valuably be informed by—in fact, need the support of—historically based reevaluations of the New Criticism of the kind this volume offers. Most obviously, such reevaluation can bring forward specific classic readings from the New Critics and their predecessors that can guide contemporary close readings. While latter-day critics would no doubt not always wish to emulate the letter of these readings (we may not want to read for irony, ambiguity, and paradox), their spirit of close critical attention can nonetheless inspire today’s work, and their readings can shape contemporary commentary both through what they model and how they go awry. As Connor Byrne’s article notes, such approaches are especially useful when confronting literary texts that present forms of readerly “difficulty,” which the New Critics, championing the difficulty of both modernist writers (such as Eliot) and their predecessors (such as Donne), prided themselves on being able to meet with specific critical techniques.

What the New Critics sought to discover in a text through close reading
were those aspects of it beyond its thematics—what comprised its “form”—
which in their view constituted the dimensions of it that made it distinctively
“literary,” and thus in need of specifically literary analytical and interpret-
tive practice. In these days of anxious reassessment of what literary studies
itself studies, this indicates another issue that reengagement with the history
of the New Criticism can illuminate. Much recent interest in the New Criti-
cism stems from its signature theoretical concern: how to read a literary text
qua literary text, rather than as historical document, registration of a moral
or philosophical position, set of themes, or witness to the cultural currents
of an era. What dimensions—what “differentia” or “residuary tissue” (as
Ransom put it in “Criticism, Inc.” [349])—remain when one turns aside from
what the text provides at the level of content? And what difference do these
dimensions make to the text’s content? One of the prime New Critical con-
tentions was that, if read closely for this “residuum” (Brooks, ii), “poetry
gives us knowledge” of a kind not otherwise available, not accessible through
other modes of discourse. Recent work from Charles Altieri, whom Marjo-
rice Levinson associates with the New Formalism, engages these New Critical
efforts to theorize such “literary knowledge,” reads them as having fallen
short and considers how to follow this lead of the New Critics into deeper
knowledge of the value of “dispositions”—states of mind, body, and feel-
ing—that poetry, if closely read with attention to what it does distinctively
qua poetry, can uniquely help us to achieve. “For me,” Altieri notes, “all the
ladders start with the New Criticism” (259).

But all this should not imply that renewing engagement with New Criti-
cal close reading and its theoretical underpinnings pertains only to literary
studies. The relevance of close reading to other disciplines constitutes another
compelling issue toward which this volume gestures. As Best and Marcus
note, since the 1980s, literary critics have felt “licensed to study objects other
than literary ones, using paradigms drawn from anthropology, history, and
political theory”; and by the same token, other such fields have “themselves
borrowed from literary criticism an emphasis on close reading and interpreta-
tion” (1). In this new era, approaches to reading and interpretive techniques
honied in the domain of literary studies have come into increasing use in
neighboring disciplines.

In another special issue of *Representations*, appearing in Fall 2008 and
entitled “On Form,” members of the journal’s editorial board present essays
that variously insist upon the rich potential inherent in reading for form
across the disciplines. Encapsulating the issue’s mission, Thomas Laqueur
recalls that the interdisciplinary journal was in fact originally established out
of interest in how texts in different fields often employ similar forms: the
founders shared a concern with “genre and plot that seemed to structure
events in the world as well as on the page and on canvas; in the figures of metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy that informed novels, political theory, and legislation alike . . . in historical isomorphism, that is, an ‘identity’ or ‘similarity’ . . . of form between seemingly different contemporaneous or temporally distant domains” (51).

It is in this spirit that the contributors to this special issue of Representations bring self-consciously formalist interpretive strategies to their objects of study—whether the British film documentary Seven Up, passages from Flaubert and Melville, the Florentine Codex, military history, the evolution of the modern crematorium, a specific edition of Rousseau’s Social Contract, or the ephemera of notes and meeting agendas associated with Representations itself. Considering the “intellectual and emotional responses” that prompt many commentators today to return to formalist readings, Samuel Otter suggests that their keywords “often signal . . . a sense that there has been a loss of recalcitrance, idiosyncrasy, and surprise in textual analysis.” A prevailing feeling animating the return to form is that “Critics move too quickly through text to context or from ideology to text, without conceding the ‘slowness of perception’ that the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky described as characteristically produced by verbal art” (117). Otter’s invocation of a giant figure from an earlier stage of formalist interpretation reminds us that the New Critics were certainly not the only voices advocating for varieties of “close reading” during the first half of the twentieth century: Otter highlights the importance of a careful engagement with that earlier history with an eye to enriching contemporary critical practices. Marjorie Levinson likewise notes in “What Is New Formalism?” that when reassessing formalisms of the past, we should not focus exclusively on the New Criticism, though it is still the New Criticism that is most closely associated in contemporary North American contexts with early to mid-twentieth-century formalist analysis: we need also to “introduce students to a wider array of formalisms: Russian formalism; Aristotelian and Chicago school formalism; the culturally philological formalism of Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer; the singular projects of William Empson, F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards, Northrop Frye, Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth” (563).

Such historical work can not only inform new varieties of close reading, but can also foster close critical reading of the very critical strategies involved in different forms of close reading. Bradley Clissold’s reading of William Empson comes to mind here, with its suggestion that the tools of formal analysis can yield valuable and provocative results when brought to bear not only on Empson’s poetry but also on his literary criticism, as well as the relations obtaining between the two. And in rereading the New Criticism itself closely, we need to consider the ethical implications of bringing
epilogue

into play again its techniques, theoretical concerns, and assumptions. As Cecily Devereux’s essay emphasizes, among the reasons for the New Criticism’s fall from dominance was its inter-imbrication with understandings of literary canon, academic culture, and aesthetic and literary values that today’s academics can no longer countenance. She stresses the importance of remembering, in other words, the ethical blind spots of the New Criticism, especially in its institutional varieties, that involved it in the perpetuation of a patriarchal, Eurocentric, elitist academy many have labored over the past four decades to overturn. This, coupled with the emphasis of the New Critics themselves on ethics—as Robert Archambeau points out—can sensitize us anew to the ethical valences of acts of close reading.

Archambeau suggests that New Critical work itself, with its indebtedness to the “Romantic tradition of aesthetics-as-ethics launched by Schiller and Coleridge”—which advocated balanced, disinterested subjectivity, developed through engagement with aesthetics, as a precondition to citizenship—indicates an important form of ethical thought for our time. In this vein, another insightful recent meditation on the ethics associated with New Critical thought is Jane Gallop’s “The Ethics of Reading” (2000). Reflecting upon her pedagogical experiences, Gallop argues for the widespread applicability of close reading to the study of texts, whether literary or otherwise. Gallop goes so far as to locate the sine qua non of literary studies not in the objects that it addresses—always a problematic paradigm—but rather in the specific interpretive approaches it takes to those objects. For Gallop, what makes her courses specifically “English” courses “are not the books we read, but the way we read the books we read”—that is, “close reading” (7). Starting from this cue, Gallop argues for a return to careful close reading as the best way of attending to what texts actually communicate, rather than to what we assume they say because of our own projections. In Gallop’s view, close reading provides a crucial way of contending with, and learning from, the “otherness” of texts: paying close attention to the claims by which they transport us beyond what we already think.

In both their acts of historical reevaluation and the interpretive methods they enact, the essays in this volume demonstrate the cogency of this claim. For Gallop and for us, the value of close reading extends even beyond what it has to offer to interpretive rigor, pedagogical strategies, and the process of defining and legitimizing the discipline of literary studies: the value of close reading resides also in how it can help us to attend to, and engage with, the voices which fill the world around us. “Close reading,” Gallop points out, “can thus be a crucial part of our education. . . . Close reading can equip us to learn, to be open to learning, to keep on learning” (11). Notwithstanding
her reservations about the relationship of close reading to the exclusionary canon that New Criticism fostered, Gallop’s remarks here notably emphasize the “openness” of close reading, in marked contrast to the now longstanding (and as we hope to have shown, misguided) claims for its prohibitively “closed” nature. Instead of a practice of close reading which would seek to keep the world out, a carefully articulated and historically engaged close reading “is not just a way of reading but a way of listening. It can help us not just to read what is on the page, but to hear what a person really said. Close reading can train us to hear other people” (12).

As close reading enjoys a renaissance not just within English departments but throughout the academy; as we find ourselves, accordingly, focusing once again upon “reading for form,” it is for something more than just a simple lesson in literary history that we return to the work of critics such as Richards, Empson, Ransom, Tate, Brooks, and Warren. We can return profitably to them better to appreciate the complex relationship that has always obtained among strategies of close reading, disciplinary practices, and ethical principles.

Notes

1. In “The Strategy of Digital Modernism,” which investigates “DAKOTA”—a digital text by Young-Hae Chang’s Heavy Industries putatively developed out of a “close reading” of Ezra Pound’s Cantos I and II—Jessica Pressman observes that there has been much discussion in recent work on digital literature about the applicability of traditional literary methods of “close reading” to digital text and the distinctive, “media-specific” reading experiences it generates. She suggests that

Digital literature demands a close reading practice that incorporates not only the external cultural and historical influences affecting the text (for example the politics, historical perspective, or embodiedness of the reader and/or author), but also the media-specific aspects (for example the specificities of Flash as an authoring tool and the significance of the work’s distribution online rather than on CD-Rom). YHCHI’s statement that Dakota is “based on a close reading” demands that we read Dakota in relation to The Cantos and at the same time reflexively reassess our own close reading practices. YHCHI’s claim thus poses a challenge to investigate the relationship between the texts in question and presents an opportunity to consider the efficacy of applying the print-based standard of literary criticism, close reading, to electronic literature.

2. In our view, it is somewhat of a misnomer to call such New Critical reading “surface reading,” since, though it does not approach texts with “suspicion,” it often does
move from the more to the less evident, the apparent to the hidden—if not always in the
spirit of “unmasking,” at least to uncover what is not initially apparent.

3. In *Cultural Capital* (1993), John Guillory notes that “difficulty itself was positively
valued in New Critical practice. . . . [I]t was a form of cultural capital” (168).

4. See the introduction to Brooks and Warren for the concept of “literary knowledge”
(xiii); see also Tate.

5. As much commentary has pointed out, the New Critics shared many fundamental
assumptions with the Russian formalists—about, for example, the importance of focusing
on the literary text qua literary text, and about the autonomy of literature; but as Donald
Childs notes, the New Critics would not become familiar with Russian Formalist work
until the late 1940s (120).

Bibliography