

PETER RABINOWITZ

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Canons and Close Readings

BELIEF IN CLOSE READING may be the nearest thing literary scholars have to a shared critical principle. Academics who teach literature tend to accept as a matter of course that good reading is slow, attentive to linguistic nuance (especially figurative language), and suspicious of surface meanings.

Close reading is a fundamental link between the New Critics and the Yale deconstructionists. Indeed, deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller has gone so far as to characterize what he saw as an attack on close reading by Gerald Graff as "a major treason against our profession." Similarly, what Naomi Schor calls "clitoral" feminist criticism, and its "hermeneutics focused on the detail," is a variant of close reading. So is much reader-response criticism.

Despite its broad acceptance by scholars, however, close reading is not the natural, the only, or always the best way to approach a text. I'm not suggesting that it should never be taught or used. But I do want to argue that close reading rests on faulty assumptions about how literature is read, which can lead, especially in the classroom, to faulty prescriptions about how it *ought* to be read.

The fact is that there are a variety of ways to read, all of which engage the reader in substantially different kinds of activity. Which kind depends in part on the reader and his or her immediate purpose. Teasing out the implicit homoerotic tendencies in Turgenev's *Asya*, for instance, is a different activity from trying to determine its contribution to the development of first-person narrative techniques. In part, the way one reads also varies from text to text. Different authors, different genres, different periods, different cultures expect readers to approach texts in different ways.

The bias in academe toward close reading reduces that multiplicity. While all close readers obviously don't read in exactly the same way, the variations

have a strong family resemblance. Their dominance in the aristocracy of critical activity—virtually undiminished by the critical revolutions of the last twenty years—can skew evaluation, distort interpretation, discourage breadth of vision, and separate scholars from students and other ordinary readers.

David Daiches was not being eccentric when he argued that literary value depends on the “degree to which the work lends itself” to the kind of reading demanded by New Critical theory. The schools in vogue may change, but we still assign value to what fits our prior conceptions of reading, and the academically sanctioned canon consequently consists largely of texts that respond well to close reading.

Once you give priority to close reading, you implicitly favor figurative writing over realistic writing, indirect expression over direct expression, deep meaning over surface meaning, form over content, and the elite over the popular. In the realm of poetry, that means giving preference to lyric over narrative poems, and in the realm of fiction, to symbolism and psychology over plot. Such preferences, in turn, devalue certain voices. A writer directly confronting brute oppression, for instance, is apt to be ranked below another who has the luxury minutely to explore the details of subtle middle-class crises. Thus, for a close reader, the unresonant prose of Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* will automatically make the novel seem less “good” than Henry James’s more intricate *What Maisie Knew*, although the racist brutality endured by Ms. Wilson’s heroine is arguably more important for our culture—and thus more deserving of our consideration—than the affluent sexual merry-go-round that dizzies Maisie.

It would be bad enough if the preference for close reading simply meant that texts that didn’t measure up were chucked onto a noncanonical pile—then, at least, the rebellious could rummage through the rejects. But close reading also has an insidious effect on interpretation. Not only do we reject many works that don’t fit; more damaging, we also twist many others until they *do* fit.

Yet we fail to recognize the magnitude of this distortion. One of the major problems with much current critical practice is the tendency to underestimate the extent to which texts can serve as mirrors—not of the external world but of the reader, who is apt to find in a text not what is really there but what he expects or wants to find.

Of course, the phrase “what is really there” may conjure up the battered notion of determinate meaning, and it may thus appear that the text’s reflection of the reader is a problem only for critics who aim at uncovering authorial intention. In fact, however, there are few critics whose arguments do not depend on the assumption that there are at least some interpretive truths that are not imposed by the reader.

Critics, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who reveal hidden meanings depend on the assumption (even if it is only implied) that what the text says is, on some level, “really” there. Even contextual critics, such as Jane Tompkins, who appear to be committed to the principle that the reader’s situation creates the text, still often betray a concern about just exactly what the “real” subject is.

One might think that the tendency to read yourself into texts would be checked by experience with close reading. In fact, though, the vexed question of where the text ends and the reader begins is all the more difficult when dealing with academically trained readers, for they are especially adept at transforming

what they read into what they expect. A well-trained New Critic can turn virtually any lyric into a pattern of resolved stresses; a deconstructionist can find the cracks that when pried apart will turn the text around. Whatever political position close readers take, they can mold works by Shakespeare or Chinua Achebe to conform to their beliefs.

The combination of malleable texts and close readers can have damaging consequences. One of the most common is what I call the "figurization" of content, the tendency to treat the specific as if it stood for some more abstract state. This tends to neutralize political discourse by reducing the historical reality represented in literature to a medium for discussing more general (and presumably more important) concerns. Most college teachers of *Huckleberry Finn* have encountered students who read it in high school without ever considering slavery as a concrete, historical institution with continuing ramifications in our lives. Rather, it became just another symbol in a novel dealing with such "universal" issues as maturation.

We literature teachers often justify our profession by arguing that literature helps students expand their horizons. In their reading, they encounter people and experiences outside their day-to-day lives, and thus are encouraged to examine the unspoken assumptions by which they live.

But close reading gets in the way of students' receptiveness to these new experiences. Receptivity depends on more than the care with which you approach a text. It also depends on the variety of interpretive strategies at your disposal and on the range of your reading. The belief that close reading can unlock the doors of any text seduces the reader into carrying too small an interpretive key ring. Because close reading is *slow* reading, it also reduces the number of works the reader is familiar with.

The effects are especially stifling when close reading is practiced exclusively on canonical texts. But a preference for tiny portions meticulously chewed leads to spiritual malnutrition, even if one's diet extends beyond the traditional canon, and beyond Western literature. That is because the more painstaking the reading process, the more alert you are to intertextual nuance—to the shadows of other texts in the one you are reading. Such attention is, of course, productive up to a point, for an important way that a text communicates is through its "conversations" with other texts. But it must also be remembered that just as close readers find the meanings they expect, so do they find the allusions they expect.

Thus, when readers approach texts from unfamiliar traditions, they seek echoes of what they already know. The more closely they read, the more echoes they'll find, whether they are really there or not. As a result, the classic Western texts not only retain their centrality, but even have that centrality reinforced. Since new literary experiences are encountered *through* them, they seem to be the universal source of literary practice.

I'm exaggerating the power of teachers, of course. When reading for class, many students read closely, but few continue the practice once they've left college. In fact, most people—including teachers—who really enjoy literature recognize that close reading is a special kind of interpretive practice. Literary

scholars are apt to make a distinction between "real reading" and "reading for fun"; most nonacademic readers are likely to divide "real reading" from "reading for class." In either case, an artificial split is created between academe and "real life," which leads to theories that devalue the kinds of reading (and therefore the kinds of books) that engage most readers most of the time.

If I'm against close reading, then what am I for? The obvious alternative is pluralism.

We can legitimately show our students that different writers in different social, historical, and economic contexts write for different purposes and with different expectations. Likewise, we can teach our students that different readers (or the same reader under different circumstances) read for different reasons.

We must also give our students actual practice in various kinds of reading. For example, an introductory literature course should include many different sorts of texts: long novels as well as lyric poems; realistic (even didactic) works as well as symbolic ones; writing aimed at a broad audience as well as at a literate elite. The course should also include different kinds of tasks. Students should learn to approach a given text in several different ways, at least some of which arise out of their personal and cultural situations. Most important, we must help our students to be self-conscious about what they are doing, and to realize that every decision about how to read opens certain doors only by closing others.

It is not simply that learning new, less rigid ways of reading increases the number of works we can enjoy and learn from. More important, learning to read in different ways allows us to enjoy a wider range of texts and gain new perspectives on our cultural assumptions. Only such flexible reading leads to intellectual growth, for it is only that kind of reading that can enable us to be conscious of—and therefore able to deal effectively with—the narrowness of "standard" interpretive techniques.

ROLAND BARTHES

*Before his untimely death in a 1980 traffic accident, the French critic and man of letters Roland Barthes was a prolific interpreter, disseminator, and reviser of most of the complex theoretical concepts that wound through his country's centers of learning from the 1950s on. Barthes was born in 1915, grew up in Bayonne, attended secondary school in Paris, and received degrees in classics and grammar and philosophy from the University of Paris. He taught French in Bucharest (1948) and in Alexandria (1949). Although Barthes was director of the social sciences at the Paris École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1960 to 1977, he was more comfortable on the margins of the academy, carrying on a guerrilla conversation with it. His book *On Racine* (1963) caused a furor because of its nontraditional approach to the canonical playwright. Barthes was elected to the chair of literary semiology at the Collège de France in 1976. Barthes's works, many of which*