

The Work of Reading

“Taking off from a challenge to what one of the editors appositely calls the empirico-historicism of contemporary criticism, the writers here analyze the contemporary critical scene with a highly enjoyable wit and searching, iconoclastic energy. Close reading, the place of knowledge, the neoliberal university, historicism, are topics that come within the sights of a buoyantly refreshing scrutiny. A must read for anyone interested in our discipline and those seeking a new and enlivening understanding of it.”

—Isobel Armstrong, *Professor Emeritus of English, Birkbeck, University of London, UK*

“Why read? Why describe what we’ve read? What counts as a good description, and for whom and what can we do with a work we’ve described? Each generation of readers—and of academics in literary studies, as long as there is such a thing—must ask these questions over again: this thoughtful, trustworthy and well-assembled volume gives a generation’s answers. Poems display art, or artfulness; close reading has a history, and involves—rather than negating—history. Higher education isn’t neutral: it can sustain, or discourage, reading for form—and for justice. Reading means seeking surprise—and noticing motives. Critique may emerge as “radical defiance,” unbowed by premature declarations of its death. Critics can work by example, not just by manifesto; we may persuade (as William Empson did) by our own style. We ought to know (like Frank Kermode; unlike Polonius) what we don’t know. And we can find ways forward not just in philosophy but in the literary works we purport to love—from Milton’s syntax to Lydia Millet’s ellipsis.

This collection knows it’s not the first to raise these queries—indeed, its contributors ably and repeatedly respond to Rita Felski and to others who ask whether we can live by critique alone (N-O) or whether we’re done with it (also nope), whether we already know what we mean by form (we will keep trying). And that knowledge—alongside the ample skills of its many contributors, from multiple continents and generations—makes it perhaps the best high-level introduction to how and why we read now.”

—Stephanie Burt, *Professor of English, Harvard University, USA*

“Here is a spirited new defense of literature, close reading and critique in the era of the neoliberal university. This stimulating new volley in the ‘method wars’ brings together a range of sharp thinkers, both renowned and fresh to the field, spanning generations.”

—Caroline Levine, *David and Kathleen Ryan Professor of Humanities, Cornell University, USA*

“In the wake of historicism, post-critique and surface reading, how should literary studies conceive itself? In *The Work of Reading*, lively essays by British and American scholars, junior and senior, provide answers, including a spirited defense of critique itself, but primarily encouraging a broader vision of the possibilities of close reading as a fundamental humanist activity.”

—Jonathan Culler, *Class of 1916 Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Cornell University, USA, and author of Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction (2nd edition, 2011)*

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Editors

The Work of Reading

Literary Criticism in the 21st Century

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PREFACE

There seems to be a growing recognition in literature departments of the Anglophone world and beyond that the work of reading must proceed from the “ground up”; that is to say, the study of literature should return to manifest facts—words and texts—from the grand speculations that preoccupied previous decades. While the new orientation renders possible a reemergence of the literary, reaction as mere neutrality has always been fraught with danger. This volume argues that the return to fact announced in recent “turns” has largely obscured, perhaps more than the regimes they sought to topple, the work as work and reading as reading.

The problems facing literary criticism today emerge from pressures to which all the humanities are subjected by an age that prizes, above all, the value of use. In answering the wants of the market, there is no doubt that the fields of science and technology surpass their peers with ease. Propagating in a strange admixture, a loss of authority—vis-à-vis STEM—coupled with ostensible autonomy—as regards self-governance—the field of literary studies has in this millennium proliferated a mass of competing methodological processes. Vincent Leitch has identified in literary studies today “94 subdisciplines and fields circling around 12 major topics.”¹ Although such levels of disaggregation would normally indicate a pattern of dissolution, some tacit agreement about a generally desirable orientation seems to have crystallized. Inspired, no doubt, by

¹Leitch, *Literary Criticism*, vi.

the cultural and academic successes of STEM, literary studies has assumed some key axioms of the former's methodologies: we have thus come to be governed today, above a transient shelf of diverse options, by what Derek Attridge in the Introduction to this volume calls "empirico-historicism." Safe in the illusion of "progress" and "diversity" that the cocoon of data most often grants, we seem to have become unequal to the simple questions repeatedly posed by other disciplines, colleagues, and even friends: "what sets your discipline apart, and what, if any, unique insights can your methods yield?"

The present work seeks to challenge the hegemony of empirico-historicism, while at the same time proposing ways to emerge from our current state of disciplinary entropy. This requires us to think past the assembly line to the foundational natures of our quarry, which the few existing challenges to empirico-historicism have often passed over. We thus revisit those basic questions that divided the discipline in the past century but have been eschewed in the recent rush to relevance.

Is the text whole? Is it part of history? Is the text an external occurrence? Is it an event in the reading experience? Or both? Does the text stand outside history? Is it inimical to psychology? Is form politically interested? Do texts have instrumental value? Does close reading? Is a canon necessary for literary criticism? How can it be selected and extended? And to step back even further, what does it mean to be a literary professional? What is, in other words, the work of reading?

To address these questions, the volume has been divided into three sections, "Criticism Today," "Critical Styles," and "Close Reading." In section I, we look at the barriers in the discipline today that prevent attention to works of art as works of art. Staten considers the gradual disintegration of the artwork-as-functional-whole, beginning with the death of the author, and resulting now in an "anything goes" attitude to close reading. Hosseini zooms out to the neoliberal conditions of the contemporary university, which constantly draws the discipline of reading into the logic of markets—postcritique, its affect and attachment, being an unexpected case study in this regard. Rooney is against the artificial restriction to the apparent as demanded by recent interventions such as surface reading, postcritique, and new formalism, arguing that the hidden forces in artworks, how unexpected meanings emerge from symptomatic readings, is foreclosed by sealing the text from its social origins. Battersby argues that, given the salability of polemic tone, the discipline has come to be possessed by an attitude of one-upmanship, resulting in a series

of self-styled interventions in recent years that have contributed little to further through demonstration the task of reading.

Section II considers the craft of critical writing. The neoliberal principles organizing production in the humanities have come to reflect—despite the “freedom” that those principles ostensibly celebrate—in a uniformity of critical style that, since Adorno’s bombed volley on intellectual mass production, far from being challenged, has become a mark of pride amongst the historians of literature. Rasch protests. He argues that although we can no longer write in the vigor of metaphysical conviction, given the gradual loss of certainty in modern philosophy, we can, and indeed should, attempt to win most lasting sympathy from readers by measuring the weight and examining the poise of our judgments. McDonald draws from Frank Kermode an ethics of humility embedded in the critical style, a recognition of our fallen state that precludes final answers (and meaning) from written interpretation. Eisendrath distills from Hamlet a mode of close reading that values slowness and intimacy with the text, as opposed to the efficiency and objectivity celebrated by empiricism. Grimble recommends that professors of the humanities, to counter expectations from their courses of utility and employability, should attempt to display in their teaching and writing, a fineness and subtlety unattainable to the more instrumental courses of study.

Battersby’s call for argument by demonstration is followed up in section III, where the writers defend close reading through demonstrative readings. They counter through their unique modes of analysis and attention the main arguments against the practice of close reading of the past half-century, namely, the supposed indifference to history, politics, and psychology. Wolfson conducts a form of close reading better described as close hearing, wherein a poem is understood historically through the sounds of past poems invoked in its words. Sridhar argues against the reification of the poetic artefact and the instrumentalization of the canon by performing a reading that treats the poem as a live field of semantic and syntactic forces—forces which he then argues can be traced to past poems to retroactively construct “functional” canons. Evers proposes an understanding of history that deviates from the archival fact-based historicism that dominates the academy today by inferring from the development of narrative form the journey of the subject in its struggles with socio-political and historical forces. Kornbluh explains how a re-objectification of the artwork (from the various subjectivisms of vogue) can set off a wholesale re-structuring of political thought from the

prevailing instrumental logic—that texts should be flowery tools of propaganda—to more oblique connections between thought and environment that can be forged through formal innovations.

Most chapters, however, transcend the sections in which they are placed. Rasch's essay, for instance, collapses the question of close reading onto the question of how interpretation is to be articulated. His argument is also carried out via demonstration, of well-weighted style, in Eliot's and his own prose. Wolfson, on other hand, wants to dispel the lumbering myths in literary studies today, that close reading does away with history, and that new formalism is in any way "new." Because most texts thus transgress their sections, the organization must be understood as determined by that with which each essay is chiefly, rather than only, concerned.

The essays are also in dialogue with one another. For instance, Hosseini, Kornbluh, and Eisendrath attack in complementary ways the instrumental reason animating recent methodological interventions. Hosseini brings out the allure of employability lurking in the clamor for "attachment," Kornbluh repudiates the demand that literary works be instruments of rhetorical persuasion, and Eisendrath challenges the notion that a good study is one from which action can immediately spring.

McDonald and Rooney both affirm that knowledge of meaning will always remain incomplete. Rooney uses the Miltonic paradox, "darkness visible," to argue that the question of origin can be shrouded in mystery but must nonetheless be comprehended as an integral part of a text's meaning. McDonald, on the other hand, shows that in the writings of Kermode, the poststructuralist notion of deferred meaning and the proscription from finality in the doctrine of Original Sin combined to form a critical style that says just enough to stimulate further dialogue.

Many chapters are also dialectically interlocked. Let us take the question of whether a literary artefact is a whole. We noted that for texts to engender surprise, they must for Rooney be seen as having mysterious origins. But Staten argues that the only way to teach close reading, to ensure the selection of relevant connotations, rather than the stream of consciousness now accepted in classrooms, is to treat the literary text as a functional—as opposed to metaphysical—whole. That is, for Staten, the interpretation of a line can only be confirmed by whether it hangs together with all others.

Some pedagogical tools developed in individual chapters also supplement one another. Wolfson and Sridhar, for instance, suggest that in

reading poetry, full meaning can only be understood historically. For Wolfson, meaning in a present poem is informed by the sounds of phrases invoked from the past. Sridhar, on the other hand, argues that a poem often points to a past poem as its semantic precursor, and that close reading must account for the lyric history brought to bear on the poem's use of words. By identifying the resonances of sound and sense—as McDonald also shows Kermode arguing—canons can thus come together as world-systems that can be studied through links of shared meaning.

The essays in this volume make a case for close reading neither by acquiescence to the positivist demands of the contemporary university nor by dispensing with the actual, but by demonstrating new ways of understanding history and politics that can emerge through a close and committed engagement with the artwork. Eysers, for instance, shows how narrative form can be read “as recording device or fever chart, not of history as an external, public, empirically verifiable procession of events, and not of subjective interiority as the private counterpart to, or denial of, the latter, but of some hitherto obscure admixture of, or alchemical solution beyond, the two.”² And Wolfson states that “close reading has been derogated as anti-context, especially anti-history; yet here is Brooks facing a past critic-self with remorse, and [Mary] Shelley provoking close reading sharpened not only by literary history but also by her historical moment.”³ Such arguments are essential if literary criticism is to assert some form of disciplinary autonomy—lest we, in the hope of remaining relevant, end up second-order historians or programmers, looking constantly to methodological innovations upstream for our renewing mandate.

Wolfson's derivation of method from Keats's poetry, Eisendrath's, from the follies of the “anti-close reader,” Polonius, and Rooney's, from the pregnant paradoxes of *Paradise Lost*, show the authors' willingness to continue learning the craft of reading from literature rather than the popular discourses of the moment. Indeed, most essays in this volume ask the question “how to read?” with a sincerity that might have attended its first posing. Our focus on the brass tacks of reading is a reminder that despite the tumult of the past century, from the modernist debates on method to our own times, we have gotten no closer to answering the

² Chapter 12, 243–260.

³ Chapter 10, 195–218.

fundamental questions of our discipline. And perhaps they will always be out of reach, and, as Empson says, we will, in the end, have to “rely on each particular poem” to show us “the way in which it is trying to be good.”⁴ Nevertheless, as Attridge insists in the Introduction, writing as we are under the fog of plague, it is crucial that we examine honestly what it is we are actually doing and why it is important.

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⁴Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 7.

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faith as to embark on this journey with us, and continue guiding us, unfailingly, at each straying step. What you are about to read would not have come about without his generosity of spirit.

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