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Comment on the importance of Close-Reading in New Criticism

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Abstract:
New Criticism emphasizes explication, or "close reading," of "the work itself." It rejects old historicism's attention to biographical and sociological matters. Instead, the objective determination as to "how a piece work" can be found through close focus and analysis, rather than through extraneous and erudite special knowledge. It has long been the pervasive and standard approach to literature in college and high school curricula.

Keywords: *Close-reading, New criticism*

1. Introduction

New Criticism, incorporating Formalism, examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it. New Critics "may find tension, irony, or paradox in this relation, but they usually resolve it into unity and coherence of meaning" (Biddle 100). New Criticism attempts to be a science of literature, with a technical vocabulary, some of which we all had to teach in junior high school English classes (third-person, denoument, etc.). Working with patterns of sound, imagery, narrative structure, point of view, and other techniques discernible on close reading of the text, they seek to determine the function and appropriateness of these to the self-contained work.

2. Nature of New Criticism with reference to Close Reading

New Critics, especially American ones in the 1940s and 1950s, attacked the standard notion of "expressive realism," the romantic fallacy that literature is the efflux of a noble soul, that for example love pours out onto the page in 14 iambic pentameter lines rhyming ABABCD etc. The goal then is not the pursuit of sincerity or authenticity, but subtlety, unity, and integrity--and these are properties of the text, not the author. The work is not the author's; it was detached at birth. The author's intentions are "neither available nor desirable" (nor even to be taken at face value when supposedly found in direct statements by authors). Meaning exists on the page. Thus, New Critics insist that the meaning of a text is intrinsic and should not be confused with the author's intentions nor the work's affective dimension (its impressionistic effects on the reader). The "intentional fallacy" is when one confuses the meaning of a work with the author's purported intention (expressed in letters, diaries, interviews, for example). The "affective fallacy" is the erroneous practice of interpreting texts according to the psychological or emotional responses of readers, confusing the text with its results.

To do New Critical reading, ask yourself, "How does this piece work?" Look for complexities in the text: paradoxes, ironies, ambiguities. Find a unifying idea or theme which resolves these tensions.

The volume's closing essay, Cecily Devereux's "'A Kind of Dual Attentiveness': Close Reading after the New Criticism," points back to the New Criticism in an article that, aligned with contemporary work from Jane Gallop and Terry Eagleton, seeks a renewal of "close reading."

While Devereux remains wary of rehabilitating the kind of "close reading" advocated by the New Critics, "as the New Criticism represents . . . a problematic, exclusionary, and deeply biased notion of the literary and of the discipline," she nonetheless suggests that the emphasis the New Critics placed on close reading is one we should reconsider today. As she explains what's at stake: "The call for a return to close reading is a call for English studies to define itself again" and clarify what constitutes the discipline's distinctive object of study—what differentiates it from neighbouring fields such as history, sociology, and philosophy. The problem facing contemporary critics, however, is how to do so, and how thereby to reaffirm "the literary," without "undermining the crucial late-twentieth-century expansion of the literary . . . beyond a limited, male dominated, Anglo centric, white canon of particular genres" associated with the New Criticism. These articles seek to illuminate aspects of New Critical work that offer resources for rethinking contemporary approaches in literary and cultural studies, as well as the direction of the profession more generally. In 1970, retrospection more than two decades after the heyday of the New Criticism, just as its academic sun was setting, Richard Othman reflected upon the "relevance" of literary culture as significantly shaped by the New Criticism in academic contexts of the mid- to late twentieth century. Looking back on the previous two decades, acknowledging the wide impact of the New Criticism on the generations of readers that it had trained and inspired, he noted that, The New Criticism was the central intellectual force in our subculture during those years." Accordingly, the educational culture in departments of English, he maintained, was far more robust during the New Critical heyday than it had been in previous generations. In 1970, however, a cute awareness of an increasingly politicized counterculture in America and controversies about Vietnam was exposing the painful limits of a vision of the "study of literature" built from New Critical ideals. At that point Hofmann meditated on the changing profession for a new wave of academics in English who would not be able so easily to avert attention from uncomfortable political realities as had academics of the 1950s and 1960s. In Hofmann's view, the New Critical vision had left professors of English—along with those who followed their ideas of a richly moral life derived from the study of literature—unfortunately insulated from the forces of the surrounding culture. Forty years after this time of transition, this collection seeks to reopen the question of what the New Critics' literary and cultural theory, approaches to close reading, vision of literary study, ethical directions, and pedagogical approaches, might offer us today. As the articles in this collection make clear, the New Criticism provided much of the foundation for what we still do now in literary studies; and if we are to reassess our situation at the outset of the second decade of the twenty-first century, if we are to avoid the kind of insulation that Othman laments, we need to understand more richly the New Critical matrixes of conviction, professional drives, and intellectual and artistic commitments from which so many of our contemporary practices derive. 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 revaluation 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. In "The Historycization 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 "a historicism" of the New Criticism, approaches such as deconstruction in many respects carried on careful close readings whose manoeuvres 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 waning 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 version, 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 programs 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 neighbouring 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 defence against authoritarian, top-down forms of pedagogy. Like many others in the field today—Paglia, Graff, Eagleton, 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 underscoring the importance of the historically evaluative 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 "symptomatic reading") that has held significant sway over literary–critical practices since the 1970s, when New Criticism faded from the scene and the "meta-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 scepticism 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).2Animating 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 revaluations of the New Criticism of the kind this volume offers. Most obviously, such revaluation 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 readably "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.3What the New Critics sought to discover in a text through close reading were those aspects of it beyond its thematic—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 interpretive 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 Criticism stems from its signature theoretical concern: how to read a 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 contentions 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 Marjorie 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 feeling—that poetry, if closely read with attention to what it does distinctively 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 Critical 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 interpretation" (1). In this new era, approaches to reading and interpretive techniques honed in the domain of literary studies have come into increasing use in neighbouring 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 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 revaluation 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.

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