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Introduction

What Close Reading Is

This is a book about how *reading* becomes *a* reading—a close reading. We show how you can move from an encounter with a piece of literature, following its language and figuring out what's happening, to an interpretation and an argument. How does this work?

You read a poem, play, essay, story, or novel; you start with someone else's words; you see something in those words that means something to you, though you probably don't know what yet. Maybe what you see confuses you or riles you up, maybe it surprises you, maybe it charms or delights you. You pause; you reread; suddenly the thing you noticed starts to feel central, or even crucial, like a hidden center of gravity that draws in and changes everything around it. The work of literature becomes clearer, or more complicated, or both, and is slightly or maybe tremendously reshaped. No longer just something to read, the work becomes something to study. It becomes what literary scholars call "a text"—that large category including poems, plays, essays, stories, novels, and much besides—objects of special interest and attention, things to discuss, analyze, and interpret. And now you might look up from the text because you want to show what's happened to someone else. You want to explain something to another person: your own reader. You want to persuade, to teach. You want to say, you should understand this poem, play, essay, novel, or story in light of *this* detail, you should understand it *this way*. You want to say, it matters not to miss or misunderstand this.

Understanding close reading will make you a better reader, thinker, and writer about literature. And further: understanding close reading will make you a better reader, thinker, and writer about anything that you examine in detail and explain to someone else. Literature is the most common object of

attention for close reading; conversations in literary studies are where we practice close reading most frequently, though these range from high school classrooms to professional scholarship. This book is addressed to students of all levels, from those being asked to read closely for the first time to those who have already written theses or published articles but want to understand this foundational practice more thoroughly and improve further. We also address professors who teach close reading, and other practicing literary scholars and critics who close read expertly already. We welcome readers from literary studies, broadly conceived, and from the even broader university, and from the universe of readers and writers beyond it, with the enabling conviction that close reading is a skill that pays off in our discipline and also nearly everywhere.

What is close reading? *Close reading is the practice of paying attention to a passage of text to account for at least one aspect of its meaning and to make an argument about how it works.*

In literary studies, we read, then we write. And as we write, we often begin to read in new ways—ways that ultimately modify our writing. There are lots of ways to write about a novel, story, play, essay, or poem. You might describe, summarize, or paraphrase it. You might reflect upon it, evaluate it, or present the process of reading by recounting what it was like to be surprised by or be submerged in it. You might linger over particular details. You might offer larger interpretations and persuasive arguments about how to understand that piece of literature. If you do all of these—if you focus on an aspect or piece of the text and also use that to see the text as a whole, if by describing the text you tell someone else how to read it, if you say what it's like to read the text as a way of saying what to know about it—it is *a close reading*.

Close reading is the foundation of literary studies as a discipline in the modern research university. It is the basic activity that distinguishes what literary scholars do from other kinds of discussions about books. Interpreting a text is not the same thing as offering praise (or disparagement) of a book, play, or poem in response to someone asking you if you liked it—it's not a review. Nor is interpretation what you would provide if someone asked you what the novel or movie is about, nor even what it's like to read or watch. Close reading grounds general arguments in the analysis of specific details. If we compare a text to an engine, then close reading holds up one small part—say, a spark plug—and says how it works and why it's crucial—how it makes the car run.

Anyone can learn how to close read. It helps—for those who intuitively grasp how to do it and also for those who are learning—to have the process

broken down into steps. This book offers you an anatomy of close reading. It's an instruction manual. If you want to bring more attention to reading literary texts, or if you already read literary texts with care and now you want to know how to take the next step in your thinking and your writing (which are closely related), or if you want to better understand the scholarly and critical articles and books you're encountering, we wrote this book to help. Close reading is a skill—a craft—and much like the work of a mechanic, or a pianist, or a dancer, you learn how to do it by doing it, assisted by the guidance we provide here.

In this first section of the introduction, we name and describe the five steps of many close readings: *scene setting*, *noticing*, *local claiming*, *regional argumentation,* and *global theorizing*. These steps will help you understand what a close reading is and what it is doing, whether for the essay you're writing or the article you're reading. You will be able to orient yourself better in your own writing and the writing of other scholars. You will be able to talk more clearly about what makes a close reading succeed, either your own or another scholar's. (If you write a close reading, you are a literary scholar. Welcome.)

Let's look at an example. We frequently teach close reading in our classrooms using the poem known as "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams.[1] Here is the poem in its entirety:

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens

Here is a one-paragraph close reading of this poem that we wrote:

> In William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," the vocabulary—chickens near a wet wheelbarrow—is simple. Kindergarteners would be familiar with nearly all of the words in this poem. They are drawn from the everyday world of agriculture. But there is one exception. Right in the

1. The poem didn't have a title in Williams's 1923 book *Spring and All*.

> middle of the poem, one of these words is not like the others—"glazed." "Glazed" is not from the same set of vocabulary as "chickens" or even other adjectives like "red." "Glazed" comes from a different world than the rest of this scene; it comes from the world of the aesthetic, of art and beauty. By describing the wheelbarrow as glazed, by describing the rainwater on it as akin to a glass-like shine as on ceramics, the poem grants a surprising status—the status of an art object—to an ordinary gardening tool. How, then, to understand the poem's assertion that "so much / depends" upon this red wheelbarrow? The poem suggests that aesthetic beauty can be found anywhere, even in this unlikely scene. Still further: the poem insists on the importance of recognizing that anything can be art. This is not a claim that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but rather that art is not the exclusive property of the elite. The poem's simple vocabulary, then, reinforces this idea that art belongs to the everyday world of ordinary people. Its form—each stanza has the shape of a wheelbarrow—also echoes the homely audacity of its claim that in the modern era we must rethink what art is, where it comes from, to whom it belongs, and what it should do.

What is happening in this brief paragraph? It begins by saying something so obvious that maybe you didn't even think it needed to be said because no one could disagree: the basic account of where we are and also what kind of words these are. But then the discussion homes in on a single detail, one word, and what seemed obvious is turned around, made surprising, sharpened. Then the paragraph builds an argument about how to understand the whole poem in light of just one word. The close reading ties together the poem's form and content. It reaches beyond the poem to talk about art and social class.

How does this close reading work? How does it move from its beginning to the end? Here are the five steps again: *scene setting*, *noticing*, *local claiming*, *regional argumentation*, and *global theorizing*. Remember: we are talking about how to organize a close reading in an essay, article, or chapter; we are talking about literary scholarship or criticism and not what the activity of reading itself is like. First we'll run through the steps, and then we'll provide concrete examples for each.

Step 1: Scene Setting. Scene setting identifies what you think matters in the text. What is relevant for the close reading that is about to arrive? Limit the information at hand, and only provide the background that makes what you will notice and argue meaningful. You are establishing common ground with your reader.

Here is the scene setting in the close reading on "The Red Wheelbarrow"—

> *In William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," the vocabulary—chickens nearby a wet wheelbarrow—is simple. Kindergarteners would be familiar with nearly all of the words in this poem. They are drawn from the everyday world of agriculture.*

These sentences mark the range of what we will pay attention to in this poem, and set the stage for the rest of the close reading.

Step 2: Noticing. Then the close reader focuses more tightly by *noticing* a detail. Noticing is often expressed as bafflement or surprise—something's missing, something's in excess, something's odd. Why this word rather than another? Why this punctuation mark? Why repeat that word? Why this ambiguity? Why this leap or lacuna? What has caught your attention, what has snagged you, where are you stuck?

In this step, you, the close reader, point to the detail that you've noticed—you identify it as specifically as possible. You usually explain why you noticed it, often with a statement of confusion, curiosity, or even annoyance. Sometimes students worry that what they notice is obvious. In our experience, the more precise the detail, the less obvious it is, and also the less likely anyone else will have also noticed it.

Sometimes experienced scholars notice details more effectively than novices, because they are more aware of literary conventions and where a text might be departing from them: they might be more skilled at scansion and so may notice where an iamb is substituted with a trochee; they might understand the generic expectations of gothic fiction and so notice when a narrator's perspective is particularly untrustworthy. But sometimes brand-new first-years notice details that experts have never stopped to consider. Don't be intimidated or feel like everything has already been seen and explained long ago—it hasn't! Trust that what surprised you will surprise your reader.

To notice well, you have to read slowly and be ready to be surprised; pay attention to your own expectations. You may even imagine writing the text as you read it. You should be able to point to what you notice: it must really be there on the page, and ideally it should be small enough to fit under your fingertip. If it's diffuse—if you notice a vibe or style or tone or even a theme—find the best example and point to that. If you're noticing ambiguity, you must be able to point to a specific detail as an example.

Here is the noticing in the close reading of "The Red Wheelbarrow"—

> *But there is one exception—right in the middle of the poem, one of these words sticks out, one of these words is not like the others—"glazed." "Glazed" is not from the same set of vocabulary as "chickens" or even other adjectives like "red." "Glazed" comes from a different world than the rest of this scene; it comes from the world of the aesthetic, of art and beauty.*

We point out a detail—the single word "glazed." It's really on the page and small enough to fit under a fingertip. Then we explain not just what we noticed but why we noticed it.

Step 3: Local Claiming. After noticing a detail, the close reader makes a claim about how to understand what they have noticed. The close reader does this by saying how that detail is working in its immediate context of a sentence, line or stanza, moment, or paragraph. We call this step *local claiming*.

A claim is not description nor summary: it is interpretation. A claim says "understand this detail this way." Just as the detail you have noticed must be as specific as possible, your language here must be as precise as possible. Spend the time to make your account of how to understand the detail that you've noticed tight, to say exactly what you mean, and know that you may continue to tinker with the claim so that you have the right terms.

Your claim should say something along the lines of "X detail in Y text should be understood in Z way." Further, if you are saying "understand this detail this way," then you are implicitly saying "and not just that way." A claim, then, must have potential counter-arguments, and if someone could not disagree with a claim, it is not a claim at all. If you've noticed an example of the color red and you are arguing that it symbolizes blood, that is usually grounds for a weak argument, because such a claim rarely sustains reasonable counter-arguments. What would probably work better is to notice the text's use of symbolism and make an argument about why it is using figurative rather than literal language. Someone else could agree with you that red symbolizes blood, but disagree with you—usefully!—about how to understand the text's turn to figuration.

Coming up with compelling counter-arguments is a great way to test and sharpen a claim; ask yourself or someone else how the same detail might be understood differently. Don't create counter-arguments that are fake or purposefully weak—straw men that no one who has read the text carefully would be convinced by—in the hope that it will make your argument look stronger by contrast when you knock them down. The stronger the counter-argument,

the stronger your claim. The reason for this is that claims offer to help the readers of your essay with their own confusion. When you say, "understand this detail this way (and not in that way)," what you're also saying is "it is *useful* to you if you understand this detail this way (and less useful if you understand it some other way)." A claim makes sense of whatever you notice; a claim offers help. You, the close reader, need to be confident and precise. You are now the teacher. You should own your own authority explicitly here; you need to recognize that you are telling your own reader that it will make a difference to them if they to listen to you.

Here is the local claiming in the close reading of "The Red Wheelbarrow"—

> *By describing the wheelbarrow as glazed, by describing the rainwater on it as akin to a glass-like shine as on ceramics, the poem grants a surprising status—the status of an art object—to an ordinary gardening tool.*

This step is a claim that links the detail—"*By describing the wheelbarrow as glazed*"—to an interpretation—"*the poem grants . . . the status of an art object . . . to an ordinary gardening tool.*" This claim shows how the detail is working in its immediate surroundings in the text; it makes sense of what was confusing just one step before.

And the claim launches an argument. Someone could disagree with this interpretation of what the poem is doing with the word "glazed." Maybe "glazed" should be understood as a lack of focus, like when eyes are glazed. Maybe "glazed" is about use-value rather than aesthetic value, as ceramic pots that are glazed are more waterproof, or there could be a claim that aesthetic value and use-value can coincide. This one-paragraph reading does not engage with those counter-arguments, but if it were longer, it could, and discussing why those other arguments do not show what this claim does (not necessarily that they're wrong but that they're not as useful or not useful in the same way) would strengthen it.

Step 4: Regional Argumentation. The close reader now reaches beyond the immediate context to say how that detail sheds light throughout the text—*regional argumentation*—by connecting it to other details. The link between each of these steps is not "and"; it is "so" or even "because." *Because* of the background established in *scene setting*, you can see the detail that *noticing* points to; *because* you see that detail, and because you can hear this *local claim* about it, you can begin to understand how it helps us understand other aspects of the text.

Regional argumentation uses the local claim as a lens through which one can see something else about the text. You might connect the text's content to its form or style or show how two apparently unlike aspects of the text are flipsides of one another as you move toward an account of the text as a whole. This is also a step that benefits from considering possible counter-arguments. Indeed, someone might agree with the local claim but see another path than the one you're pursuing to a larger regional argument.

Your local claim says, "understand this detail this way," your regional argument says, "by agreeing with my claim, you will better understand what this concept means in this text" or even "by agreeing with my claim, you will better understand how this text conceptualizes this idea and explains how it works." That concept might be one that lots of people have written about, like love, nature, or power, or one that's been overlooked or seems too obvious to investigate. (In the third section of this book, we offer some sample close readings that invoke concepts including lyric, description, and colonialism in their arguments about texts.) Regional argumentation is where your claim gets stakes, where its implications become clear, where you say why it matters.

Here is the regional argumentation in the close reading of "The Red Wheelbarrow"—

> *The poem suggests that aesthetic beauty can be found anywhere, even in this unlikely scene. Still further: the poem insists on the importance of recognizing that anything can be art. This is not a claim that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but rather that art is not the exclusive property of the elite. The poem's simple vocabulary, then, reinforces this idea that art belongs to the everyday world of ordinary people. Its form—each stanza has the shape of a wheelbarrow . . .*

The detail the writer has noticed and made a local claim about is connected to other details in other parts of the text, or to other aspects of the text. The argument that "glazed" gives the wheelbarrow the status of an art object is linked to the poem's simple vocabulary and its wheelbarrow-like stanzaic form. There's an account of the text as a whole, one that itself depends on textual details like the poem's vocabulary and form but links up to ideas about art and class: beauty must be common, in both the senses of being simple and widespread.

Step 5: Global Theorizing. Finally, the close reader reaches further to connect the reading to the author's body of work, the text's genre, form, or period, or historical context: *global theorizing*. Global theorizing can be extremely

powerful; this step is where we locate the experience of literature telling us about the world and teaching us new ways of understanding our place in the vast reaches of space and time, and also in the confines of our own bodies. You can't skip right to this though: you have to build your way here. Most undergraduate essays do not reach global theorizing, or only gesture toward this step, even in a senior thesis. Global theorizing is the step that requires the most advanced knowledge of the field and discipline, which is, after all, one of the distinctions between undergraduate work and professional scholarship. It is worthwhile, though, for undergraduates to be familiar with global theorizing because, even if you do not plan on pursuing graduate work in literary studies, this is the horizon at which all your work is aimed. Your work, if you were to develop it further, could change how we understand other texts. It is also worthwhile to understand this last step to better recognize the stakes in the scholarship you read.

Here is the global theorizing in the close reading of "The Red Wheelbarrow"—

> *the homely audacity of its claim that in the modern era, we must rethink what art is, where it comes from, who it belongs to, and what it should do.*

This brief paragraph-long close reading has only the most gestural global theorizing. Here, it's an idea about how art has changed in the modern era. This step is where this close reading would link up with theory and scholarship not just about William Carlos Williams or even poetry, but about modernist aesthetics more generally, as well as theories about the intersection of art and class.

We developed these names for the steps of close reading for this book by reading and rereading some of the most famous close readings from the past hundred years and discovering that they make the same moves. We named them to help us see across apparent dissimilarities that although close readings seem to work in many different ways, there is a shared methodology. The distinctions between local claiming, regional argumentation, and global theorizing are partly descriptions of scale and reach; local, regional, and global describe the deliberate extension from the particular to the abstract. But also, in showing how an interpretation grows and gathers force, we paired the geographical vocabulary with the stages of argumentation, which begins with a claim—often a single sentence—then strengthens to an argument involving the analysis of evidence and the invocation of conceptual terms, and then, working theoretically, intensifies and widens further to reach beyond the text.

Just as we can separate and identify the basic parts of a poem—lines, sounds, images—or of a lab report—methods, results, discussion—so too can

we separate and identify these steps of a close reading. As with poems and lab reports, the whole exceeds the sum of the parts. But there are parts. A close reading is nearer to a proof than to a poem; a close reading turns a quotation from a literary text into evidence that can support a claim and that has stakes. The best close readings make their steps look natural, even inevitable. But like a dance, we can still discern and name the moves, however gracefully they're embodied, while affirming that, like a dance, success depends in part on the gracefulness of the performance.

Our example of a close reading of "The Red Wheelbarrow" makes the right moves, and makes them fairly gracefully as it interprets the poem's ideas about what's valued, what's art. What it doesn't show, though, is the core of why we close read: because we value art. We think so much depends upon it. Moving from reading to a close reading, then, involves *being moved*.

What Close Reading Does

A close reading offers something useful to someone else. A close reading says not just "look at this!" but also "look at it this way" and then "because that makes a difference." You have something to offer your reader, something that will help them read the text you're discussing. In this section of our introduction, we'll talk about three different ways to think about what a close reading offers: *understanding*, a performance of *skill*, and *conversation*.

Understanding

A close reading is an argument. An argument requires a claim. It extends our understanding by reasoning from what is known to be the case—what we can all see in the text—to what is claimed to be the case—how we should understand what we see.[2] A claim is debatable; you want your reader to believe it, but you are going to have to prove it. A claim shouldn't overstate the case; you should only claim what you are prepared to prove. A claim also shouldn't understate; you can and should be bold. When you're close reading, a claim points to a detail or moment in the text and then takes a leap into interpretation—in our words, it moves from *noticing* to *local claiming*. This section will discuss how to make that move, which lies at the heart of any close reading. In the previous section of the introduction, we outlined the five steps that close readings take. Argument is the route and the rationale that connects those steps; its logic underpins them.

To build toward an argument that extends our understanding, you must distinguish a claim about a text from a summary or description of it. A good summary or description is accurate and not contestable. It wouldn't make sense to call a claim "accurate," and a claim must be contestable. Understanding how to use close readings to argue is one of the fundamental skills of college-level literary studies.

Writing your own arguments is a big leap for many students. In high school, your writing assignments likely asked you to summarize and describe, to identify themes and distill main ideas. You may be familiar, maybe even have expertise, with writing five-paragraph essays. (If you don't know this term:

2. For an extended argument about how argument functions differently in the humanities than in the sciences, see Eric Hayot, *Humanist Reason: A History. An Argument. A Plan*. (Columbia University Press, 2021).

a five-paragraph essay comprises an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion, with the thesis, often the last sentence of the introduction, stating a topic for the essay, usually identifying a theme that the essay traces through the text with one example in each body paragraph.) This sort of writing can be a useful way to learn what an essay should roughly look like. But it is not an argument; what it shows is comprehension. A standard five-paragraph essay is nearly all summary and description. In other words: it looks like an essay but doesn't do everything an essay can do.

A five-paragraph essay might have a thesis like this: "In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the repeated mention of 'hours' shows that time is an important theme." The first paragraph might discuss the conversation between Romeo and Benvolio about Romeo's "sad hours" before he meets Juliet; the second, Romeo and Juliet's plan to meet "by the hour of nine" in the balcony scene; and the third, the description of Juliet as Romeo's "three-hours wife" at the time he is banished; and therefore, the essay might conclude, time is an important theme in this play. This essay might result from reading a text with attention—it might say "look at this"—but it is not a close reading: it does not explain how to understand even one detail in the text, much less the text as a whole. It is not an argument.

But you can build on the skills you already have. There's no *local claiming* or *regional argumentation* in a five-paragraph essay, but there could be. This example of a five-paragraph essay about *Romeo and Juliet* could become a strong close reading. Take the general statement that "time is an important theme" and use that as *scene setting*. Scene setting is summary or description; it's not the end of argumentation but the beginning. You could even add the detail that the whole play takes place over only a few days to focus the summary further. Then "time" is no longer the conclusion of a high school five-paragraph essay but the initial premise, the background: identifying the prominence of time in *Romeo and Juliet* prepares us to notice a detail and make a real claim about the play.

Take the more specific pointing to "Romeo's 'sad hours' before he meets Juliet" and recognize that it's *noticing*. You have paid attention not only to the text but to your response to it: maybe you were struck by the strangeness of referring to "hours," objective units of clock time, as "sad"; or maybe you were annoyed that the play jostled you out of your absorption by reminding you about the passing of time. For some reason, emerging out of your puzzlement or personal investment of one sort or another, you became attached to "sad hours."

We could generalize and say that in five-paragraph essays, *scene setting* is placed as a thesis, and then each paragraph has some *noticing*. But in a college

essay—and beyond—you make a claim. You could make a claim along any number of lines, including something like: "In *Romeo and Juliet*, the hour, a shared measurement of time, is also used as a measurement of personal emotion. As a result, throughout the play, time represents an intersection between the objective and the subjective, and an examination of how characters struggle to determine a common basis for understanding each other." Or you could make a completely different argument about hours, like this: "The characters' constant discussion of time in *Romeo and Juliet*, especially in the small unit of the hour, serves to remind the audience not only of the compressed timeline of the play, but of the even more compressed—and more artificial—timeline of watching a play. They should be read as moments of self-consciousness of the play's artistry." These sketched-out close readings share the same *scene setting* and even the same *noticing* as each other—and as the imagined five-paragraph essay—but have very different *local claiming* and so then they also have different *regional argumentation*. But because they have *local claiming*, they both argue rather than just summarize and describe.

How do you know if you're making a claim? When you make a claim, you're saying not just what you see in the text, but how to understand what you see: not just "look at this" but "look at it this way." The most important parts of *local claiming* are offering that understanding to your reader and being precise and clear in your language. Getting the claim into just the right words takes time and effort; we often revise our claims until the end of the writing process. While you shouldn't write a claim with the goal of being contentious, if you're specific in what you notice and precise in what you say about it, that alone will ensure that no one else is likely to see or say it in quite the same way—your argument will be your own. If you've noticed a detail in the text because it snagged your attention but you don't know what your claim about it should be, don't worry; if you noticed something, especially something you found surprising or odd, you probably have some kind of hunch about its importance in the text that led to it jumping out at you in the first place. You may not have a claim yet, but you also probably aren't as far as you might think.

What makes a claim a good claim? A good claim is a clear claim. A claim should be specific and precise in what it says about how to understand what it notices. This is a matter of your word choice, but choosing the right words requires a lot of thinking about what you mean. For example, the claim about *Romeo and Juliet*: "In *Romeo and Juliet*, the hour, a shared measurement of time, is also used as a measurement of personal emotion." Instead of "*personal* emotion," we could have said "*private* emotion" or "*individual* emotion," and these

would have been similar to our claim but each would have led in a slightly different direction. The first alternative suggests skepticism's problem of other minds; the second alternative potentially points toward people as political subjects; and the claim we made is about the relationship of feelings to being a person. You have to get your words right, which helps you get your ideas right, which in turn helps you get your words right: writing and thinking happen together. These near relations to your argument are also counter-arguments. When you engage with a counter-argument, you don't have to say that it is wrong: it might just not be all the way right. Engaging with near-miss counter-arguments, done thoughtfully, helps you bring more nuance and lucidity to your own claim.

A good claim offers fuller understanding. Good claims do not necessarily notice more or larger things in the text—often the reverse, *noticing* usually remains narrow and specific—but some arguments are stronger because their explanations are powerful. In philosophy, you can talk about how an explanation succeeds in two different ways: because an explanation is probably true since it's the most warranted by the evidence; or because an explanation might be the most broadly explanatory, which means it's not as likely to be true but if it were, it would be very powerful. The philosopher Peter Lipton, who outlines this distinction, calls the first kind of explanation *likely* and the second kind *lovely*.[3] He uses the example of a conspiracy theory for lovely explanation—not likely to be true, but proposing an explanation that has extensive reach and force. Some close readers lean likely, others lovely.

A good claim is supported not just by evidence alone, but also by the analysis of that evidence. Your claim must be warranted. We sometimes tell students to think about a lawyer in a dramatic courtroom scene holding up a piece of evidence—say, a shoe or a receipt—but then remember how that lawyer has to show exactly how that shoe or receipt matches a footprint or has a timestamp, how it clinches the case or leads to an exoneration.

Here is an example of a claim that's clear, but fails to show how the argument is supported by the evidence. We had a student who argued that Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" was about Christmas. The poem takes place at dusk in midwinter in a rural, pre-modern landscape as a traveler pauses with his "little horse" to watch the snow fall. The student chose a striking detail—"miles to go before I sleep"—as worthy of attention and hazarded an interpretation: it is Santa Claus who has to travel the whole

3. Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (Routledge, 2004), 59.

world in one night; the speaker of the poem is Santa Claus; the poem is about Christmas. One could certainly disagree: the speaker is usually read as contemplating suicide. But the argument, though in some ways shaped like a close reading, is weak in an instructive way. It is neither likely nor lovely. It does a poor job of analyzing its evidence. The speaker travels with a horse, not a reindeer, as the student asserted. The tone of resignation—"But I have promises to keep"—doesn't belong to the idea of Santa as we understand him.

In short, the connection between the evidence and the argument was weak: there was no possible justification for how the evidence (winter, an animal, a task) counts as evidence. The philosopher Stephen Toulmin calls this link in an argument between evidence and claim a "warrant."[4] Close reading depends on making its warrants, its connective tissue, apparent to the reader, by accounting for why the quotation from the text works to support your argument. What might be obvious to you is not obvious to your reader, and quotations aren't self-evident as evidence. Notice and make your local claim—but also connect those for your reader. *Make your evidence into evidence* to support local claiming and regional argumentation. A large part of any close reading is showing how you're moving from one step to the next. You don't disappear from one step and reappear on the following one; you construct the route between them.

When students are confused about how argument works, they sometimes treat the text as a puzzle to be decoded, asserting, for example, that blue symbolizes peace. Such claims are typically unwarranted. Why should blue symbolize peace and not sadness, or sadness and not the ocean? But also, although decoding the speaker of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" as Santa Claus is weak, it offers some new understanding. The poem does have a mythic quality: its attention to the solstice is interesting, its vague placelessness is strange, its vocabulary is childish or for children. A more successful essay that began with noticing that the poem takes place during the winter solstice and beyond "the village" might have argued, for example, that the poem is a critique of organized religion and its control over society. This argument could have connected the location of the poem to the poem's form to think more about how the poem investigates control as it keeps a tight, but slipping, grip on its meter and rhymes, and even argued that the blank white page stretching around the poem could be read as the solstice's white landscape and a place where there are no rules.

Finally, a good claim has stakes. It's not just noticing—"look at this"—nor just local claiming—"look at it this way"—but also the follow-through of

4. Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 135–36.

"because that makes a difference." The argument about *Romeo and Juliet* has stakes; if you argue this claim—"In *Romeo and Juliet*, the hour, a shared measurement of time, is also used as a measurement of personal emotion. As a result, throughout the play, time represents an intersection between the objective and the subjective, and an examination of how characters struggle to determine a common basis for understanding each other"—then the stakes will be about how language fails to communicate. You might end up arguing that Romeo and Juliet are the exception to this, that they are able to use words to establish their common world . . . or you may argue that the play's tragedy is that they ultimately cannot, and their misunderstandings doom them. But the stakes are about how the argument shifts our understanding of the play; they are a claim for the importance of the argument.

What counts as stakes? Stakes are calibrated skillfully, neither so immense to be implausible nor too inconsequential to matter. You don't need to solve world hunger or revolutionize our sense of Shakespeare. But you do need to give yourself credit for the power of what you are arguing. Stakes are often expressed via a conceptual term; for example, the stakes of the *Romeo and Juliet* argument are about *communication*—how it works and how it fails in this play. The "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"/Christmas essay doesn't have stakes because it doesn't have a strong argument. But an argument like "the poem's taking place during the solstice and beyond 'the village' is a critique of organized religion and its control over society," the stakes would be about *control*—its powers and its limits.

Figuring out what counts as stakes is part of learning the expectations, assumptions, and methods of the discipline of literary studies. It means recognizing how what matters to you in literature connects with the discipline's rules and sense of itself; it means entering our community of literary scholars. The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn coined the term "paradigm" to describe when science has an "accepted practice" and "coherent traditions of scientific research."[5] For example, Ptolemaic astronomy, with the earth at the center of the solar system, was one scientific paradigm, and, in the Renaissance, it was replaced by Copernican astronomy, with the sun at the center. Kuhn calls working in an established paradigm "normal science," our typical practice. In literary studies, close reading is part of our normal science. So when we say that an argument based on close reading is useful, we mean that we believe it to be making new knowledge because it is playing by our rules. In the discipline of literary studies, you show the truth of an argument by demonstrating

5. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7.

how your evidence supports your claim and how your claim makes a difference in how we understand a text or term. If your argument is useful to other people—to your own readers—in offering greater understanding of a text in precise and clear language—it counts as good.

Skill

When we sit down to write, we often find ourselves uttering the phrase, "writing is hard." Your professors—we assure you—often struggle with it, writing some sentences, some paragraphs, even many pages again and again, trying to get it right. We did so with these pages. And close reading is a complex genre of writing. Sometimes students feel like they ought to excel at close reading from the start. That's almost never the case, even if you read attentively, even if you have lots of ideas about the text, even if you have always been a superb student and always loved literature and writing. This is a complex genre that requires knowing *how* to make the kinds of arguments we describe above; to do so requires a set of skills specific to the genre that you have (almost certainly) not yet mastered. In short: it's okay if it's hard; it's hard for a reason; one of those reasons is that writing close readings takes practice. We wrote this book to help you improve.

What does it mean that close reading is a craft and a skill?[6] As a craft, close reading shares qualities with knitting, pottery, and woodworking; you show you know how to do it and in knowing how you reveal deeper knowledge of yarn, clay, wood—or words.[7] As a skill, close reading is akin to practicing a sport or a musical instrument; your practice makes you stronger, more confident, more careful. No one can pole vault without instruction and practice. Close reading is more than a set of steps with an argument. Even if you have the elements of a good argument, you can communicate them poorly, and the argument can be less effective than it should be.

Apt execution matters. For your *scene setting*, you might need to provide plot summary in just a sentence or two, or to capture the implicit occasion for a lyric poem; you might embed a quote among your own language; you might delimit your intellectual terrain by pointed exclusion; and this is just *scene setting*. You reveal the nuance of your understanding in the nuance of your prose. And not only your understanding: a pianist is bound to a score but a good pianist imprints her own style. A close reading is also a creative act. In the precise choice

6. For an account of close reading as a "cultural technique," see John Guillory, *On Close Reading* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).

7. See also Jonathan Kramnick, *Criticism and Truth* (University of Chicago Press, 2023).

and order of words and punctuation you put your own mind on display. The best close readings dazzle with both their careful attention to the text and to their own thinking and writing. The best close readings have command, style, even fun.

But how are you supposed to know what a dazzling close reading looks like? It's impossible to write poetry well if you never read it, never find poets who show you, say, what a single line can do. Because you need examples, this book is not just a presentation of the steps, not just us telling you how to accomplish them; it also includes many examples, examples where you see a dazzling close reading nested in an account of how it was done. Reading these is, we hope, like a football player watching classic game tape with a coach to isolate opportunities for instruction.

The contributors to this volume isolate many different skills. For example, to move from *local claiming* to *regional argumentation*, you might rely on the side-by-side comparison of details—such as, say, the description of two characters—to "identify abstract underlying patterns" and to "detect subtle differences in gradation," as Elaine Auyoung demonstrates. Under Auyoung's guidance, the familiar task of compare-and-contrast—which can thwart a strong argument if it substitutes for a claim—becomes an analytical tool of great power, fueling the argument. But it takes practice to develop the specific acuity required to know when differences are salient, and how. Auyoung's comparison is a learned skill that enables the inferential, inductive logic of argumentation. The selection of fruitful details, or what we call *noticing*, is the fundamental skill of close reading, the ground upon which the rest is built. Among many techniques, you might, as Jeff Dolven and Joshua Kotin suggest, imagine yourself as the author of a text, making decisions word by word. Why, if you were the author, would you follow that word with this one?

Undergirding *noticing* or any other skill is the most fundamental skill of all in the study of literature: you must train yourself to be aware of your experience when reading. Normally, we read to enjoy a text, which often involves a sense of immersion where we pleasurably lose ourselves. It is difficult to learn to watch yourself reading, which, to be valuable, ought to be at once analytical, in the sense that you are observing yourself, and naive, in the sense that you are also the object of your observation—and the you who is observed ideally preserves her immediate responses of pleasure and surprise. Some sometimes worry that this most fundamental skill can alienate students from the joy of reading, kill pleasure, ruin books; but, when done right, close reading preserves the old pleasure while doubling it with a new satisfaction: the pursuit of knowledge, the accomplishment of skill, the thrill of discovery, and a deeper intimacy with literature.

Conversation

You might read alone. But we close read with other people. Close readings emerge out of conversations and they flow back into conversations. They are products of and offerings to a community.

When you read literary criticism in academic journals or books, you might feel like you are eavesdropping on a long-running conversation between scholars where close reading is part of what they offer to each other. You are—and as you respond to their arguments, you are joining their conversation. You might find yourself agreeing, or not. You might want to respond "yes, and. . . ." You can build on or alongside or back down from someone else's scene setting, noticing, local claiming, regional argumentation, or global theorizing. (Look in the last section of this book to see how scholars situate close readings as part of longer genres of writing.)

You can also build your own close reading from the ground up. But that still does not have to mean doing it alone. Once you can identify the steps of close reading, you will see how good class discussion can take the shape of a collaborative close reading: one student notices a detail, another makes a local claim about it, another offers a counter-argument, another student connects that first detail to a second, another links them by arguing regionally. When we teach, we often prompt students to begin our conversations in exactly this way. "What did you notice?" we ask. "What's the local claim?" "Are there counter-arguments?" "What else does that detail connect to?" "How can we argue regionally?" "What terms are at stake?" "How can we theorize this argument globally?" Even if your teacher doesn't ask discussion questions using our vocabulary, you can still map how a conversation moves forward—and how you can help it move forward—with the steps from this book.

You might go from classroom conversation—or any conversation, really—to writing your own close reading, which you might then send to someone: an instructor, probably, but maybe also an editor or a family member or a friend. To send someone a close reading—or anything you've written, really—is an act of hope. Hope entails risk, and risk makes it nerve-wracking to send someone your writing. You can mitigate risk by making strong and skillful arguments with the help of this volume. But risk always remains in asking for a conversation. For such a request to succeed, you need to demonstrate that you really want a conversation, that you care about the matter at hand. Your interlocutor needs to hear you saying something like: I want you to see what I see because it matters to me; I care about it, and I care about whether you care about it. For an

invitation to conversation to work, you need to write about something that matters to you: you think something about a text should be understood a certain way, and you put in the time and effort and care to say so. After all, as Jeff Dolven and Joshua Kotin write in chapter 5, "one of the things that close reading is" is "a way of figuring out how to talk about how a poem makes you feel." You figure out how you feel and think and you ask your reader if they feel how you do, think how you do, and if not, why not?

When we get stuck in our own writing, we remember that Dante has his beloved Beatrice say something of a motto: "Amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare"—*love moved me, that makes me speak*. This might sound very far away from a homework assignment, but can you think about how love makes you speak? What do you see in the text that you care about? What are you compelled to say about it to someone else who might not see it, or see it the way you do? When we get stuck, we like to begin a new paragraph as if it were a letter addressed to someone we love: *Dear* _____ . . .

Close reading *should* entail risk. Everything valuable does. We encourage you to take seriously the task of standing between, and thinking with, two other people. Someone has invited you to think with them: whoever wrote the text under consideration. Allow something about the text to matter to you. Write about what matters to you. You enter the conversation in good faith and invite a third: your reader. Each makes themself vulnerable to misunderstanding. But the reward, if it works, is intellectual community.

What Close Reading Has Been

In the first two sections of this introduction we aimed to teach you what close reading is and what it does—and also to invite you to care about it. We hope you feel that it is a practice worth cultivating. This section depends on your interest. Our tone changes—it becomes a little more technical—because we are addressing you now as a close reader or aspiring close reader who wants to situate yourself in the history of literary studies, who wants to know how its practitioners have practiced so that you can be an informed practitioner yourself. Whether you know it or not, your ideas about how to read have been shaped by the theories we discuss in this section, so it helps to be self-aware about how you're already thinking about what art is and how it works.

You will encounter references in this book to schools of thought that have been influential for close reading: New Criticism, deconstruction, New Historicism, Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and others.[8] When we were literature students, these were often taught as options on the menu of methodologies—choose one and do a reading with it—which frustrated us because it obscured what made these movements matter: what motivated their founders, who they were arguing against, why they cared. In the next few pages, we provide some of this context. It's often the case that literature professors tightly associate close reading with New Criticism. But many other movements, including those most critical of New Criticism, developed the practice in subsequent decades and depend on it, even if our account of close reading hasn't kept pace.

New Criticism

Imagine your professor hands you a set of poems and asks you to analyze them. But their authors and titles have been redacted. This is the storied origin of close reading, an experiment conducted by I. A. Richards at Cambridge University in the 1920s. Even strong students with experience reading poetry struggled. They failed to make out the plain meaning of the poems, the foundation for any

8. For classic overviews that remain salient, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), and, specifically on deconstruction, Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Cornell University Press, 2008). For postcolonialism, see Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Columbia University Press, 2019). For reassessments of practical criticism and New Criticism, see Andy Hines, *Outside Literary Studies: Black Criticism and the University* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), and Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

further study. They went wrong variously, which Richards recorded: among other errors, they gave stock responses; pursued irrelevant personal associations; indulged in sentimentality; and did not feel the poems' sensual qualities, such as rhythm. These problems persist one hundred years later.

Richards was astonished at the extent of misapprehension, and he made it his project to document it. Curiously, though credited as the founder of close reading, he did not practice it much, neither as a writer nor as a teacher. Instead, he wrote and taught as part of a collective experiment in studying our habits of reading. We should remember that close reading, although central to literary studies, is not without alternatives.[9] We might study genres, or authors' biographies, or texts' relations to context, or, like Richards, we might conduct experiments belonging to a larger research project—all of which are compatible, too, with close reading.

Though not much of a close reader himself, Richards inspired an influential generation of scholars to address common errors of misapprehension by developing the practice of how to do it persuasively, skillfully—correctly. Noreen Masud, in chapter 18, wrestles with a student of Richards, William Empson, who accomplished dazzling, intimidating interpretations of texts, shucking tight clams to present us glistening pearls of insight. Already in Empson, close readings become artworks worthy of close reading, an argument Katie Kadue picks up in chapter 7 on Christopher Ricks, an inheritor of Empson, showing that their style of close reading—in which the analyst mimics the style of the text at hand—thrives in the twenty-first century. A protégé of Ricks, Eric Griffiths, demonstrates the power of stripping back to the basics—who says what when and where to whom—as Robert Stagg presents in chapter 4. A later student of Richards, Helen Vendler, proposed close reading by identifying with poets, by *becoming* them, imagining how they wrote their poems, word by word, a technique Jeff Dolven and Joshua Kotin explore in chapter 5.

Richards's legacy persists in the United Kingdom under the name practical criticism and in critics such as Angela Leighton, who, as Beci Carver shows in chapter 3, argues that the sounds of literature are indispensable to understanding its meaning. When Richards's scholarship traveled to the United States, it evolved into New Criticism, which conservative intellectuals established in the 1930s and

9. For an account of some of those alternatives, see Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

1940s, and which held sway as a dominant movement into the 1960s.[10] Whereas Richards taught students to infer a poet's intention from a poem (a practice taken to its limit by Helen Vendler), New Critics argued that intention was irrelevant to the critic—a debate that continues today. New Critics emphasized the uniqueness of literature. They argued that the orderly form created by an exact sequence of words, placed precisely, enables unique effects, such as irony and paradox, which make literature a rich source of knowledge about humanity.

According to New Critics, to paraphrase literature deprives it of its power. Consider Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken":

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

We might say the poem is about *how we'll never know what might have been had we made a different choice at a crucial juncture when we were younger, but that*

10. New Criticism continued to travel internationally. For an account that traces its worldwide influence, see Yael Segalovitz, *How Close Reading Made Us: The Transnational Legacies of New Criticism* (SUNY Press, 2024).

we'll nevertheless think back on that juncture longingly. And we might get at something of the gist of the poem. But no matter how well we summarize it, the summary will be fundamentally weaker than the poem, because the poem's strength is in how Frost crafts it with rhymes on simple words and lines that sometimes end with grammatical stops and sometimes are enjambed, calling on us to feel the poem with our ears and the hair on our neck as we think about it with our mind. The art of noticing as a close reader involves learning to recognize how the elements of a text's form make it function as a work of literature.

Belief in the uniqueness of literature lends itself to aesthetic judgment.[11] If you think literature is distinct from other kinds of writing, it's a short step to arguing that what makes a work of literature good is its commitment to those qualities that make literature distinct. Thus John Crowe Ransom, a leading New Critic, argued for the superiority of the metaphysical poets, such as John Donne, because of their deft deployment of paradox, over the Romantics, such as William Wordsworth. Similarly, Cleanth Brooks, resuscitating one Romantic in Ransom's wake, argued that John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is the apex of poetry because it brings paradox to its apotheosis. By enacting paradox, an irreducible truth of human experience, and by making paradox beautiful through a text's harmonious unity, literature makes life bearable: an argument that Emily Ogden makes in chapter 15, following Robert Penn Warren in his reading of a poem by Ransom.

New Critics worried that the rise of scientific authority and expertise, in public and in universities, would limit our understanding of truth to what science can prove, leading us to forget about the truths to which literature testifies. They argued that literature offers unique access to truth through irony, paradox, and its powers of directing our attention. As reactionary white men, especially in the earlier years, Brooks, Ransom, Warren, and their fellow New Critics, went further, using the harmonious unity of poems to argue against what they saw as the fragmentation of industrial modernity, preferring the agrarian past of the racist US South. Whether they embrace or reject New Criticism, subsequent scholars have grappled with its legacy of racism.[12]

11. For a study of practical critics, New Critics, and the problem of judgment, see John Guillory, *On Close Reading* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).

12. See Niall Munro, "Neo-Confederates Take Their Stand: Southern Agrarians and the Civil War," *European Journal of American Culture* 39, no. 2 (2020): 141–62; Andy Hines, "New Criticism and the Object of American Democracy," in *Outside Literary Studies* (University of

Arguing with and against New Critics, the question of context became a core concern for future close readers.

Deconstruction

If you were to close read like a deconstructionist, you might notice when a text is self-referential, such as when the speaker of Frost's "The Road Not Taken" says, near the end, "I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence." Now, as you read the poem, *is* that telling, that ages and ages hence. Or you might notice when a text contradicts itself, such as when Frost's speaker says he took the road "less traveled" even though earlier he'd noted that "the passing there / Had worn" both paths "really about the same." Or you might notice how a text sets up binaries that it can't maintain, such as Frost's less and more (or equally?) traveled roads. Noticing these details might lead you to theorize that poetry, like life, is never one thing, never unified in some pure present, but is always divided from itself.

Deconstruction arrived in the United States in October 1966 when a charismatic French philosopher named Jacques Derrida spoke at a conference at Johns Hopkins University. Its influence grew across the 1970s. Deconstruction rejects tenets of New Criticism, above all the idea that a work of literature is a unified whole that provides access to enduring human truths. Instead, deconstructionists argue that every literary text is in conflict with itself, inescapably fragmented, porous with its context. If, for New Critics, the unit of literature is the *work*, for deconstructionists, signaling their difference, it is the *text*.

Early New Critics looked back longingly to a preindustrial past. Early deconstructionists looked ahead in anticipation of a future when we will have transcended myths of individuality, knowing that language governs us more than we govern it. For deconstructionists, language is the context for a text. Theirs is a Nietzschean world where God is dead, truths are socially constructed, and we must overcome two millennia of Platonic metaphysics with its privileging of spiritual, timeless essences in favor of the pre-Socratic chaos and flux of a will to power. One American scholar remembered the excitement many felt at the time: "Just when New Criticism was looking old,

Chicago Press, 2022); Matt Seybold, host, *The American Vandal*, podcast, season 9, episode 5, "The Racist Interpretation Complex," Center for Mark Twain Studies, August 28, 2023, 1 hr., 21 min., 21 sec.; Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre, eds., *Rereading the New Criticism* (Ohio State University Press, 2012).

deconstructionism came along to make close reading chic and smart and potent again."[13]

Deconstruction gained institutional strength in the 1970s and 1980s, girded by its uptake in new academic fields: Black studies, postcolonialism, feminism, queer theory. These fields recognized the force of deconstruction's identification and disruption of binaries that give one side power over the other: white/Black, empire/colony, man/woman, straight/gay. The potential for using deconstruction to intellectually dismantle social boundaries was always latent given the continuity between text and context. Summer Kim Lee brings us an example in chapter 8 from Barbara Johnson. Johnson noticed something different in a favorite New Critical poem, John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." She noticed that the poem's speaker idealizes the urn's silence—but refuses to be silent about it. From there, Johnson builds a staggering reading that reveals the force of patriarchy as a hidden structure informing the history of art, enabling men to adopt the position of the victim in relation to women, and entrapping women in a double bind.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. adopted deconstruction for Black studies. Earlier critics, including deconstructionists, had identified what they called the master tropes of figurative language: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Gates argued that "we might think of these as the 'master's tropes,'" referencing slavery to argue that figurative language is imbued with race in service of white supremacy.[14] Meanwhile, he argued that race—a social construction we treat as real, founded on a white/Black binary that cannot withstand pressure without falling apart—"is the ultimate trope of difference."[15] In a classic deconstructive inversion, he asserted that African American writers are the true masters of refusing closure and celebrating difference. In chapter 13, Omari Weekes demonstrates how Hortense Spillers—a former colleague of Gates and a foundational figure in Black studies who drew inspiration from deconstruction—explored the consequences for literary theory of centering Black women. Whereas Gates and Spillers focused on texts by Black authors, Toni Morrison accomplished an inversion in how we understand canonical white American

13. Jane Gallop, "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading," *Profession* (2007): 181–86.

14. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (June 1983): 686.

15. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5.

literature by placing race at its center. She turned our attention from the victims of racism to its perpetrators. "The subject of the dream is the dreamer," she wrote.[16] We should notice, then, what few bothered to notice before: how white writers imagine race. In chapter 6, Adrienne Brown pays attention to how Morrison close reads for "when and how race shows up in texts."

It has become increasingly common in some contexts to identify as nonbinary and to provide one's pronouns, part of a large cultural shift in our collective understanding of gender since the 1990s. Inspired by deconstruction and the work of French philosophers, especially that of Michel Foucault, scholars in gay and lesbian studies, literary studies, women's studies, and philosophy created queer theory. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars had used close reading to show how men degraded women with misogynistic stereotypes in their fiction. Literature by women, often newly rediscovered, offered an alternative with, some argued, powerful stylistic implications. Judith Butler intervened in feminist theory to argue that gender is not an essence at the core of our identity but a performance we must enact every day when we put on a skirt or slacks or inflect our voice this way or that—even if our performance is coerced and policed by social rules. We learned from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to take seriously her first axiom: "People are different from each other."[17] Sedgwick invited us to proliferate the possibilities for gender identifications and sexual orientations. The founding figures of queer theory were superb close readers. They show the transformative social potential of careful attention to a short passage of a text.

By 1990, when Butler and Sedgwick published landmark books, deconstruction was in retreat. It had been twenty-four years since Derrida delivered his groundbreaking paper at Johns Hopkins. Deconstruction had displaced New Criticism. But critics argued that deconstruction had too much in common with New Criticism. Barbara Christian, a Black feminist critic, argued in 1987 that deconstruction focused on dead white men from the Western tradition to the exclusion—possibly tactically, she suggested—of flourishing new writing from women of color. Those Black scholars who adopted deconstruction, she wrote, had been co-opted "into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation."[18] She called for attention to the sensuousness of African American literature. Natalia Cecire writes, in chapter 11, about how Butler, who previously close-read philosophy more than literature, heeded Christian's call, offering a

16. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 17.

17. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), 22.

18. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987): 52.

close reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing* whereby Butler could theorize sex, gender, and race together.

Others, in the 1980s, argued that both New Criticism and deconstruction sanctified the aesthetic object, the literary work or text, by treating it as distinct from other historical documents. Both New Criticism and deconstruction declared the author irrelevant, dead. Both paid such close attention to literature that, even as they attended to race, sex, and gender, they elided history, the fundamental source of context. By eliding history, they missed—their critics said—everything.

Historicism

The turn to history was not a turn away from close reading. But the new movements needed to find a new tradition that reconciled history and literature. They found it in the work of Erich Auerbach.

Auerbach was a German Jewish philologist steeped in the work of Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, whose *New Science* (1725), which Auerbach translated, countered his era's leading theory, which asserted that truth is timeless and universal, by arguing that truth is particular to historical time. This was a revolutionary claim. Auerbach was further trained in a tradition of close reading that held that texts emerge from human experience and thus contain the world of that experience; it is the task of the critic to join extensive interdisciplinary knowledge, personal intuition, and precise attention to language to conjure that world from the text. In *Mimesis*, which Auerbach wrote from Istanbul, exiled by Hitler's Third Reich, he did so brilliantly, beginning with Homer and the Old Testament, describing their synthesis with Dante, and narrating the eventual disintegration of experience in modernity with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In each case, and with the figures he explicates in between, Auerbach close reads patiently to show how reality appeared in a series of historical moments, caught in the amber of literature.

Reading Auerbach can be intimidating. Not because he is difficult—he is easier to read than, say, Jacques Derrida—but because he makes extraordinary close reading look simple. He walks us from scene setting through global theorizing, allowing us to follow his inductive logic to awe-inspiring ends. Oren Izenberg and Julie Orlemanski, in chapters 1 and 9, explain how he does it: through rhetorical sleights of hand.

Izenberg notices something odd in Auerbach's scene setting when it comes to Virginia Woolf. Auerbach changes one small detail, which makes a big difference for his reading. Rather than see this as cheating, Izenberg argues that

misdescription is often revelatory of the perspective that close reading demands of a reader. Orlemanski argues that though Auerbach presents us with a clear, direct path, his investigative process of clearing it was meandering, requiring he travel hermeneutic circles. Auerbach interprets a passage from a medieval French play about Adam and Eve. His local claim relies on previous knowledge he holds about medieval French peasants. If, as Emily Ogden shows us, New Critics supplement interpretation with social knowledge—how we read people in life—Auerbach supplements interpretation with historical knowledge: moving cyclically between history and text. Auerbach inadvertently shows us that every close reading is partial, but no less true for its partiality.

Auerbach inspired at least three traditions of close reading: New Historicism; Marxism; and postcolonialism. He showed that with enough erudition and stylistic verve, a scholar could reveal the world embedded in a short passage from a historical literary text. Scholars who shaped these traditions were undergraduates when New Criticism was dominant, and they found in Auerbach a refreshing opening from the cloistered text onto the world. (If you are an undergraduate reading this, you, too, belong to the continuing history of literary criticism and should carry yourself with the poise of your participation.) These traditions resisted deconstruction in different but important ways—and not without adopting something from French philosophy.

In the 1980s, a group of scholars in California, impatient with the persistence of New Criticism and opposed to how deconstruction "seems to re-erect the hierarchical privileges of the literary," came to be associated with New Historicism. *Came to be associated* because New Historicists are eclectic, pluralistic, and non-programmatic. Two commitments unite them: the refusal to separate literary from non-literary texts; and a resistance to the abstract, the general, and the theoretical in favor of the "singular, the specific, and the individual." They took from Auerbach the practice of finding in a brief passage "a vast social process."[19] They tend to resurrect the author muted by New Criticism and killed by deconstruction. Without agreed-upon principles, New Historicism, more than most methods, depends on the virtuosity of scholarly performance.

New Criticism advises us to notice irony and paradox, deconstruction binaries and self-referential moments. New Historicism, in contrast, suggests that the decision about what to notice is not very important.[20] Whatever we

19. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 14, 6, 45.

20. Those of us experienced with New Historicism might notice that its claim that it matters little what we notice is an assertion of a methodological tenet following from a philosophy of

choose, we will discover language that belongs to some larger discourse from the time the text was written: maybe theological debates about the eucharist from language about the defilement and rot of bodies in *Hamlet*, from one celebrated essay.[21] Or to return to "The Road Not Taken," we might notice that it was published in 1916 and only recently had Americans begun to see woodland paths that were "grassy and wanted wear" as attractive and worth pursuing rather than frightening and in need of domination. Moving from noticing to theorizing—their resistance is to the deductive application of theory, not to inductive reasoning—New Historicists, like queer theorists, often bring to their close reading a philosophy drawn from Michel Foucault: the most insidious forms of power in contemporary society are not obvious but operate subtly through language, serving to control and govern people. New Historicists reject the concept of *reflection* as too simple. That is, texts do more than show us some social discourse; they themselves operate on discourse, becoming social agents whose actions reverberate in the world. The nineteenth-century novel disciplines bourgeois women into the domestic, gendered worldview necessary for the expansion of capitalism: take care of the house so your husband can be productive in society. Or "The Road Not Taken" instills in readers an ironic detachment in response to the increasing life decisions one—here, white men—could make in an industrializing, secularizing society. To make these arguments persuasive requires historical knowledge, conveyed to one's reader through elaborate scene setting.

"Always historicize!" exclaimed Fredric Jameson in 1981. He meant it differently from the New Historicists then formulating their ideas. They hew closely to Auerbach and Vico, understanding history as endowing texts with the spirit of the age. Jameson supplements Auerbach, whom he studied with at Yale, with Karl Marx.[22] G.W.F. Hegel subsumed Vico's theory into a teleological progression where the spirit of the age guides us toward ever greater knowledge; Marx inherited Hegel's historicism, keeping the teleology but installing a new guide, capitalism, leading us not toward knowledge but toward the limits

language rather than a faithful observation of actual practice; in practice, New Historicists tend to notice details that emerge as salient in the process of following Auerbachian hermeneutic circles from text to history and back again.

21. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, "The Mousetrap," in *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 136–62.

22. Jameson wrote an extensive critique of New Historicism. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 181–219. Jameson was also influenced by the genre criticism of Northrop Frye, in addition to Auerbach and Marx.

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