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The Future of (Close) Reading

JEAN PETERSON

We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language.
That may be the measure of our lives. —Toni Morrison

Upon seeing that one of the seminars offered for the Shakespeare Association of America annual meeting of 2016 was titled, quite simply, “Close Reading,” my first thought was, “Close reading! Who has a problem with that?” My second was that I wanted to be part of the discussion raised by the question. Some who will read this essay will remember a time when it was indeed supposed that one would have a problem with close reading (and some, perhaps, still do). We came of scholarly age just after the hermeneutics of New Criticism had been transformed by an array of new approaches and disciplinary tools. The story is now familiar: how a generation of scholars, armed with skills and concepts borrowed from anthropology, sociology, feminism, linguistics, and psychology revolutionized literary study. A keystone of the new, politically and socially engaged critical approaches that emerged was *context*, pitting the new historicist generation against the New Critics, and especially against the paradigm of reading they championed, which, detached from biography and history, aesthetically self-contained, neo-Kantian and Christian in its value of transcendence, and culturally conservative, came to seem retrograde in comparison.¹

For this misapprehension of close reading’s origins and history, Joseph North and Annette Federico offer important correctives, contextualizing some of the reasons why rejecting close reading has sometimes appeared to be progressive. Founder of the practice I.A. Richards and disciple William Empson, North reminds us, were the ideological opposites of the American followers who co-opted the method. “Our poor sense of the origins of [close reading],” he argues, “gives us the very misleading impression that it is somehow, at root, a practice of autonomous or idealist aesthetics, and as such originally or even necessarily dehistoricizing or depoliticizing.”² Close reading makes the seemingly self-evident proposition that one must read a text carefully, repeatedly, and with focused attention to the words themselves in order to understand it. It encourages deep scrutiny of the literary and linguistic effects within a work, and the patterns of its sounds and rhythms. It contemplates the structural and syntactical arrangements of words, while examining their meanings for subtleties and connotations. It rewards the ability to recognize rhetorical and literary devices and to draw inferences from them; it “accounts for the beauty and strangeness of language, [and charts] the emotional resonance of our literary encounters”³ The dominant

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paradigm of university literature departments and high school English classes throughout much of the twentieth century, it is arguably still the most central and characteristic disciplinary practice of the literary profession.⁴ It has survived new methodological challenges, and it endures as process, method, disciplinary tool, and habit of mind.

Close reading has come of age in the twenty-first century—not the only way to practice upon a text, but an essentially useful one. To engage primarily in the act of reading, to do so with intense, attentive focus; to address complex texts with careful and repeated attention—these skills remain indispensable in the peculiar, difficult and enriching profession I practice, that of convincing young people to read Shakespeare and Milton thoughtfully, perceptively, and perhaps even with passion. Students often flinch when first introduced to the dense and complex literary texts of 2, 3, and 400 years ago. Reading closely helps students to grasp what has been eluding them, leading them to discover a text's secrets, beauties and delights. I hope for my students to become proficient at reading complex prose and poetry, insightful in recognizing when specific language might merit or reward sustained attention, and open-minded in posing further questions to and about a text. In this endeavor, I could no more dispense with close reading than I could build without hammers and nails.

Here, for example, is a passage I often use very early in courses on Shakespeare. I have students begin by reading it aloud, not once but several times:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee: I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane: O, answer me! (1.4.669-74)⁵

Students might read these lines in groups, pairs, or standing in a circle. They might each take a single line, shouting out the words sometimes singly, sometimes in unison. Tossing a ball or hackysack along with the lines (an exercise actors will recognize) releases playful energy, and builds the group's focus and concentration. This process is especially effective for students disheartened by Shakespeare's monumental stature and his intimidating language; the words become "familiar in [the] mouth" as they move around the circle. The thumping rhythm of iambic meter asserts itself, as do the other sounds and devices that give the speech its urgent energy and poignancy. The group can feel and hear the anaphoric plosives, tense antithesis, and frantic drive of the first three lines; they can note the change of tone and cadence, the turn to softer consonants and long, lamenting vowels ("I will speak to thee"), and finally the force of the emotionally charged words ("King, father") and the power of Hamlet's entreaty ("O answer me!").

The exercise clarifies literal understanding (what "happens" in the speech) and a sense of its poetic effect, but these are only starting points. Words that have been spoken, shouted, tossed around a circle, have made an impact. Now it is time to examine what those words have made students notice, think, and feel. There is

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usually some focus on the vocabulary of those tensely balanced oppositions (“spirit/goblin,” “health/damned,” “airs/blasts,” “heaven/hell”). *Goblin* is a word that attracts some interest (and is an excellent choice for introducing undergraduates to the uses and pleasures of the *OED*), its lowbrow connotations a reminder that for all its elevated rhetoric and philosophical sophistication, the play is a ghost story, popular fare like one of Mamilius’ tales to thrill and horrify.⁶ And now context begins to emerge—how Hamlet stands suspended between the divine and the demonic, seeking answers no human knowledge can provide, his metaphysical uncertainty looking both to the medieval past (“crawling between earth and heaven” like the protagonist of a morality play) and the religious upheavals of the post-Reformation present. To enrich their understanding of the play’s complicated response to Reformation tensions, I might assign a chapter of Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory*, or Peter McCullough’s “Christmas at Elsinore” for further reading.⁷ Scansion invites more revelations—my favorite metric irregularity the slip from iambic meter to the odd, murmuring dactyl of *questionable* (emphasized by its near-rhyme with the previous *charitable*), halting the line’s forward momentum with a quintessentially thoughtful, Hamletian pause.

By the end of the lesson, I hope that students have gained more than a surface understanding of the speech. They have had a little fun. They have been given some confidence—which some students need more than others—about their ability to crack the mysterious Shakespeare code. They have been introduced to my go-to method for problem solving difficult passages (“Don’t understand it? Read it out loud”). They have begun to discover the many layers of meaning which a literary text can reveal. And even the most aloof and cynical has experienced some touch of emotion—of empathy, or fear, or delight—through the mysterious alchemy of *story*.

Curricular changes of the last 15 years in public education through grades K-12 may be responsible for some of the difficulties my current students experience. They were educated under the high stakes testing and lamentable methodologies of No Child Left Behind (abolished only in 2015), with results that professors of literature especially have cause to grieve. For stressed instructors under pressure to produce strong test results, assigning extended, complex works of literature became superfluous—even risky, since it is harder to distill the kind of learning reading generates into a bubble on a standardized test. Close reading requires patience and time that the demands of NCLB would not allow, and so a new methodology emerged to replace it: something called “skills and strategies” or “leveled reading.”

Rather than challenging students to struggle a little beyond their reading comprehension, “leveled” reading assures that no child will be left to read anything that might be too difficult. For underachieving students, texts are parsed and simplified, summarized and abstracted, their difficulties explained and their vocabulary scaled back.

These are appallingly misguided strategies. Weaker students have no opportunity or incentive to learn new vocabulary, nor are students given scope to develop reading comprehension. Above all, such lessons must be excruciatingly boring, more apt to convince students that literature is a dull, tedious, repetitious

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business, rather than to encourage them to find adventure, excitement, and pleasure within the pages of a book.⁸ As a method of spoon-feeding specific kinds of information to students, so that they will probably retain enough to pick the right answers in the high-stakes testing that is the legacy of No Child Left Behind, it is probably exemplary. It is hard not to draw the connection between the “Skills and strategies” emphasis on eliminating student frustration (and their wrong answers) and the very pragmatic necessity that NCLB foisted on teachers to produce acceptable test scores or lose their jobs. Upton Sinclair famously observed that “it is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.” Even well-intentioned teachers may have participated in the training of readers of little skill and no interest, bored with books, unfamiliar with the habits of mind sustained reading fosters, accustomed to having the hard parts removed, and the cognitive work of interpretation explained for them.⁹

Why does this matter? In a book published in 1924, once considered ground-breaking, I.A. Richards poses the essential question with which all of us who esteem the humanities are concerned:

What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotions of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavors?⁹

It is no secret that this era of rising college costs, limited employment, and economic insecurity has placed particular pressure on the humanities. We who teach in these fields are often challenged to justify our continuing existence—to students (as we urge them to enroll in our classes and major in our disciplines) to parents (who fret about the earning potential of their children’s degrees), to colleagues, administrators, trustees. Outside of the Academy, it can be even worse due to the popular perception of the pointy headed but useless intellectual, the *bête noir* of Fox News: the “liberal elite.”

Difficult as it is to describe intangibles such as the workings of the mind and the processes of thought, many in my profession have made the attempt. Lisa Colletta argues that “the greatest value of the liberal arts can be that students start to understand the complexity, confusion, and contradiction at the heart of human experience.”¹¹ Cary Nelson writes that in “the task of the humanities is not only to show us the ways that artists and others have penetrated our illusions by creative acts both modest and grand but also to try to discover what human cultures as a whole have seen through a glass darkly.”¹² Author of an extended examination of the contemporary humanities crisis, *Liberal Arts at the Brink*, Victor E. Ferrall asserts

that for more than 200 years, the liberal arts have provided the platform from which U.S. students developed reasoning and analytic skills that led them to become critical thinkers, able and eager to distinguish opinions from facts and prejudices from truths, alert to the lessons of history and

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unwilling blindly to accept unsupported claims and assertions.¹³

Humanist philosopher Martha Nussbaum also links the liberal arts to “democratic values,” seeing their function as a way of developing in citizens “a normative view about how human beings ought to relate to one another (as equals, as dignified, as having inner depth and worth).”¹⁴ Toni Morrison, in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech (from which my epigraph is taken), speaks of literature as key to self-awareness: “Word-work is sublime . . . because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference—the way in which we are like no other life.”¹⁵ And Colletta again: “[The liberal arts] are valuable because they are what constitute real knowledge. They are a record of the human desire to understand the world and an account of the ideas and events that brought us to our present historical moment.”¹⁶

The present historical moment to which this brings me is a fraught and troubled one. A year ago, I mused briefly in this paper over whether the Common Core standards adopted in some 45 states would succeed in restoring close reading to the K-12 public school curriculum. Today, I worry whether or not our public school system will survive the tenure of the Education Secretary nominated by the 45th President of the United States. I make no assumptions about the political leanings of my readers or the votes they may have cast in the 2016 presidential election. But by the standards of evidence and objectivity upon which academics pride themselves, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the nominee for Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos (whose confirmation for the office is pending at this writing) is an ominous choice. She shares with the other nominees to the cabinet of at-this-time newly inaugurated President Trump a lack of appreciable experience in the field she would administer, and active hostility for the institutions over which she would govern. Like the Labor Secretary nominee who has abused and exploited the rights of workers, the nominated head of the EPA with deep ties and enormous fortunes invested in the fossil fuel industry, and the Energy Secretary placed in charge of a department he once vowed to eliminate, De Vos appears to have been appointed to the position in order to dismantle the organization.¹⁷

The antipathy to public education, to experience, and to knowledge itself implied by DeVos’ nomination illustrates why members of learning communities have reason to feel apprehensive about President Donald Trump.¹⁸ Lacking any previous experience in elected office, unwilling or unable to describe clear policies, incurious, uninterested, and belligerently anti-intellectual, Trump emerged as the choice for a faction of the nation that has forgotten *how to read*. The ominously chosen word of 2016, *post-truth*, points to the violence done throughout the year of Trump to basic standards of evidence and objective, fact-based knowledge.¹⁹ Mere hours into his administration, Trump’s representatives Sean Spicer and Kellyanne Conway launched pointed assaults on the public’s cognitive awareness, asserting the validity of easily proven falsehoods, and introducing the disorienting phrase *alternative facts* into the lexicon.²⁰

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These developments underscore the urgency of our purpose as teachers, and our obligation to impart the skills that develop careful readers and competent, discerning thinkers. The habits of mind developed by deep literary study—of good communication and respect for words, of the capacity to analyze, synthesize and evaluate, of expertise in judging sources and facility for drawing valid conclusions, and the development and exercise of moral imagination, ethical judgment and empathy—highlight the vital role of the humanities in enriching civic life, and in preserving our democracy.

Notes

1. See Annette Federico, *Engagements with Close Reading* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); and Joseph North, "What's 'New Critical' about 'Close Reading'? IA Richards and His New Critical Reception," *New Literary History* 44.1 (Winter 2013): 141-157.
2. North, "What's 'New Critical' about 'Close Reading?'," 142.
3. Annette Federica, *Engagements with Close Reading*, viii.
4. North, "What's 'New Critical' about 'Close Reading?'," 146.
5. All citations from Shakespeare refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
6. "A sad tale's best for winter: I have one of sprites and goblins" (*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.25).
7. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Peter McCullough, "Christmas at Elsinore," *Essays in Criticism* 58.4 (2008): 311-32.
8. Jim Trelease, in *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), unfailingly reminds his readers, reading is an accrued skill, one that increases the more it is practiced. Students need to be challenged by material that is slightly above their comprehension level in order to learn: "The more you know, the smarter you grow" (4)! Trelease offers an optimistic assessment of the role of pleasure in reading instruction.
9. See the Common Core Standards document, "Key Shifts in the Language Arts," *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, <http://www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts> (accessed 23 January 2017), which details some effects of the widespread use of "skills and strategies" in contemporary language arts, and proposes a return to close reading as a foundational core of reading instruction.
10. I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961).
11. Lisa Colletta, "The Ultimate Utility of Nonutility," *AAUP* (September-October 2010), <https://www.aaup.org/article/ultimate-utility-nonutility#.WRn7JsYpCbg> (accessed 23 Jan. 2017).
12. Cary Nelson, "Fighting for the Humanities" *AAUP* (January-February 2012), <https://www.aaup.org/article/fighting-humanities#.WRn7bsYpCbg> (accessed 23 January 2017).
13. Victor E. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
14. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
15. Toni Morrison, "The Bird in our Hand: Is it Alive or Dead?," Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, Stockholm, December 7, 1993.
16. Colletta, "The Ultimate Utility of Nonutility."
17. According to Stephen Henderson, "DeVos isn't an educator, or an education leader. She's not an expert in pedagogy or curriculum or school governance. In fact, she has no relevant credentials or experience for a job setting standards and guiding dollars for the nation's public schools. She is, in essence, a lobbyist —someone who has used her extraordinary wealth to influence the conversation about education reform, and to bend that conversation to her

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ideological convictions despite the dearth of evidence supporting them”; see “Betsy DeVos and the Twilight of American Public Education,” *Detroit Free Press* (3 December 2016), <http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/stephen-henderson/2016/12/03/betsy-devos-education-donald-trump/94728574/> (accessed 18 January 2017). Furthermore, according to Martha Laning, “[DeVos] appointment is very disappointing to me, it is clearly one of pure ideology and a signal that privatizing schools and defunding public education are top priorities for the President-Elect”; see “Meet Donald Trump’s Anti-Public Education, Influence Peddling Billionaire: Betsy DeVos,” *Urban Milwaukee* (17 January 2017), <http://urbanmilwaukee.com/pressrelease/meet-donald-trumps-anti-public-education-influence-peddling-billionaire-betsy-devos/> (accessed 23 January 2017).

18. Scott Pruitt’s conflicts of interest with the agency he has been nominated to lead include a series of lawsuits against the EPA and a history of battling its regulations as Oklahoma Attorney General. And former Texas governor Rick Perry’s nomination to head the Department of Energy is an especially egregious choice. “Perry is uniquely unqualified to run the Department of Energy,” claims Friends of the Earth Senior Political Strategist Ben Schreiber. “Perry had no idea that the DOE’s main responsibility was overseeing the U.S.’s nuclear arsenal when he accepted the job. The only conclusion we can draw is that Trump also had no idea what the Department of Energy really does.” See Ben Schreiber, “Rick Perry Uniquely Unqualified to Lead Department of Energy,” *Common Dreams* (17 Jan. 2017), <https://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2017/01/19/rick-perry-uniquely-unqualified-lead-department-energy> (accessed 23 January 2017).

19. “Many no doubt fear that his election threatens some of the core institutions of our democracy and may be the greatest threat to academic freedom since the McCarthy period”; see “Higher Education after the 2016 Election,” *AAUP* (9 November 2016), https://www.aaup.org/news/higher-education-after-2016-election#.WRn8_sYpCbg (accessed 23 January 2017). See also Andre Perry, “Saving Academic Freedom from Trump’s ‘Post-Truth’ Nation,” *The Hechinger Report* (4 January 2017), <http://hechingerreport.org/saving-academic-freedom-trumps-post-truth-nation/> (accessed 23 January 2017).

20. “Oxford Dictionaries picked “post-truth” as its word of the year for 2016 because so many are choosing narrative over fact. Denying reality can get you elected President of the United States. From refusing climate change to exaggerating voter fraud to promoting birtherism, Trump didn’t just put American electoral politics in peril by denying truth; he puts truth itself at greater risk as his power grows.” See Perry, “Saving Academic Freedom from Trump’s ‘Post-Truth’ Nation.”

Jean Peterson joined the Bucknell Department of English in 1990, after receiving her PhD in the literature and drama of the English Renaissance from the University of Pennsylvania. She teaches and writes about Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and is especially interested in examining the performance aspect of dramatic art on stage and in film, and how Shakespeare is represented in popular culture. She is presently working on an examination of recent stage productions of *Hamlet*.