

The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading

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A few years ago I, along with a few colleagues from my department, went to dinner with a candidate for a junior position in eighteenth-century British literature. In the course of the conversation, the job candidate declared that it was impossible to get published without archival work. This was something I had never heard, and it stuck in my craw.

Whether or not her assessment of things was accurate and despite the likelihood that it varies a lot by field, I recognized that this remark does in fact represent something about the direction of literary studies today. While not literally true, the remark bespeaks what, for those whose disciplinary formation is taking place in the United States in the early twenty-first century, is an established norm. This norm diverges widely from those that governed my own professional formation three decades ago, and I want to say—at the risk of sounding like the aging curmudgeon I am becoming—that I believe this direction literary studies has taken is misguided.

It was about twenty years ago that English studies witnessed the rise of new historicism: this burgeoning movement was not only the site of brilliant critical performances but also a much needed corrective to the ahistoricism then predominant. The time was ripe for such a course correction: ahistoricism had been persuasively linked to sexism, racism, and elitism; attacks on the canon had called into question the notion of timeless works; literary studies had been ahistorical for too long.

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In the early 1980s, historicism was in such low favor in literary studies that, in order to get a hearing, it was necessary to call this work *new* historicism. For more than three decades, English had been dominated by New Criticism—and its offspring. Since my notion of the offspring of New Criticism may not yet be generally accepted in our histories of criticism, let me explain a bit what I mean before I proceed.¹

In the years just preceding the arrival of new historicism, the American literary academy seemed wholly preoccupied with a battle over what was then most often called theory. While those against theory fought hard to defend the heritage of New Criticism, it turns out that many of those on the other side were practicing, often under the name of deconstruction, a form of close reading of literary texts not in fact so radically different from New Criticism. In an essay written at the peak of the theory debate, Paul de Man makes this point by suggesting that deconstructionist reading practice basically conformed to the New Critical instructions given by Reuben Brower to his students in the 1950s (when de Man was his teaching assistant at Harvard).² While those railing against theory saw it precisely as a departure from the text, an increasing number of radical critics agreed with de Man here and complained that deconstructionist literary criticism as practiced in United States English departments was in fact all too much like the old New Criticism—elitist, canonical, and ahistorical.

When we look back at that old theory battle now, from the other side of the paradigm shift inaugurated by new historicism, the difference between the two sides seems much smaller than it did at the time. Looking back now at that period, I would emphasize not the debate about theory but the close-reading practice appearing on both sides of the divide. Deconstructionism did not challenge the centrality of close reading to English; on the contrary, it infused it with new zeal. Just when New Criticism was looking old, deconstructionism came along to make close reading chic and smart and potent again. While we might quibble about the relation between New Critical and deconstructionist reading, the fact is that for more than three decades and most recently in the theory era, literary studies in this country was dominated by the scholarly and especially the pedagogical practice of close reading.

These days, I worry about the fate of close reading. It may be a familiar skill to English professors of my generation, but I'm not confident that it is still widely taught. If practiced here and there, it is seldom theorized, much less defended. It has been, I think, tarred with the elitist brush applied in our rejection of the New Critics' canon, and I fear it is being thrown out with the dirty bathwater of timeless universals. Whatever

residual practice of close reading remains, certainly no one would say, as did that job candidate, that you can't get published without it.

My point here is not to argue about the relative intrinsic merits of historicism and close reading as methods for studying literature; I have no doubt that both produce worthwhile knowledge. Rather, I am looking at the question historically and also ultimately, if less cleverly, in terms of institutional survival.

When the New Critics introduced the methodology called close reading in the years just before and after World War II, what it replaced was literary history (the old historicism, we might call it). According to the standard histories of our profession, when New Criticism took over English studies, it injected methodological rigor into what had been a gentlemanly practice of amateur history. We became a discipline, so the story goes, when we stopped being armchair historians and became instead painstaking close readers. While today's literary historians with their leftist leanings and insistence on understanding literature in a generally cultural and especially political context are hardly gentlemanly, still I fear they are—despite their archival work—amateurs. Certainly that is what our colleagues in history think.

In the academic discipline of history, there is a field called cultural history. That phrase can also name the sort of work that, in the wake of new historicism and cultural studies, goes on these days in literary studies. Having rejected the elitism of timeless works of art, our literary history has become cultural history. While the move to understand literature within culture is theoretically good, the problem is that we generally don't do cultural history nearly as well as our colleagues in history departments, who have professional training in historical methods. We have become amateur, or rather wannabe, cultural historians.³

I would argue that the most valuable thing English ever had to offer was the very thing that made us a discipline, that transformed us from cultured gentlemen into a profession: close reading. Not because it is necessarily the best way to read literature but because it, learned through practice with literary texts, learned in literature classes, is a widely applicable skill, of value not just to scholars in other disciplines but to a wide range of students with many different futures. Students trained in close reading have been known to apply it to diverse sorts of texts—newspaper articles, textbooks in other disciplines, political speeches—and thus to discover things they would not otherwise have noticed. This enhanced, intensified reading can prove invaluable for many kinds of jobs as well as in their lives.

When literary studies broadened into cultural studies, it was precisely through the power of this move to close-read nonliterary texts. Looking at the same type of documents that a historian or a sociologist might look at,

a literary-trained cultural scholar could notice different sorts of things and thus have something original to contribute. If we stop teaching close reading to our students, they will not be able to apply it to other cultural texts. Cultural studies will then become a weaker sort of cultural history, with neither the serious historical methodology in which historians are trained nor the close-reading method in which literary critics used to be trained.

Back in 1985, a feminist studies conference at Brown University was the occasion for a memorable panel including both historians and literary critics ("Feminist Politics"). The most striking thing about that panel was the mutual envy. Literary critics felt inadequately historical; historians felt inadequately attentive to language. At that moment, this disciplinary envy was in equilibrium.⁴

The results of that mutual envy have been productive indeed.⁵ Not only has literary studies become much more historical in its approaches but also many historians have become adept close readers. Unfortunately, in the ensuing two decades, the productive tension of this mutual envy has been lost; the balance has swung too far in one direction. We seem to have given up precisely what the historians envied and to have settled into a permanent position of inferiority. To me this looks like disciplinary suicide.

Back in the day when close reading typified our discipline, other disciplines learned from and borrowed this methodology. If as a discipline we only import and do not export, I fear we will collapse under the weight of our debt. If we persist in becoming second-rate historians, we lose any rationale for the continued existence of literary studies.

While the threat to disciplinary survival is surely the most important reason to resist the historicization of literary studies, there is one more reason I want briefly to mention. As has often been noted, New Criticism was, at least in the classroom, a great leveler of cultural capital and thus suited the moment, after World War II, when American universities for the first time greeted large numbers of students who were not from the traditional elite. Where the old literary history favored students with cultured family backgrounds, close reading in the classroom tended to level the playing field.

It is thus ironic that, in a moment of antielitism, we tended to jettison close reading in favor of historicism. At least in the undergraduate classroom, the professor who keeps up with the latest literary historical research must feed that background to students who are not themselves going to an archive. Close reading made possible active learning; historicism returns us to an older, more authoritarian model of transmitting preprocessed knowledge.

For more than three decades, antielitist pedagogy has crystallized around Paulo Freire's criticism of the banking model, in which the teacher

deposited knowledge in the student. This model remains dominant in most academic disciplines where there is a huge gap between scholars producing knowledge and classrooms where students receive, repeat, and apply that knowledge. The literature classroom has represented a real alternative to the banking model: students had to encounter the text directly and produce their own knowledge; close reading meant they could not just apply knowledge produced elsewhere, not just parrot back what the teacher or textbook had told them. I fear that the demise of close reading as a classroom method will leave us with students who learn cultural history by rote and then apply it to texts. I fear this will mean the loss of one of the most widespread and successful examples of a nonbanking pedagogy. However elitist the New Critical canon might have been, in our rejection of the New Critical method we might end up throwing out our most effective antiauthoritarian pedagogy.

That loss may not be the only irony of the current trend. Let us recall that literary studies embraced historicism as part of a rejection of timeless universals, a rejection that at the time I applauded and that I continue to applaud. It is precisely my opposition to timeless universals that makes me value close reading. I would argue that close reading poses an ongoing threat to easy, reductive generalization, that it is a method for resisting and calling into question our inevitable tendency to bring things together in smug, overarching conclusions. I would argue that close reading may in fact be the best antidote we have to the timeless and the universal.⁶

NOTES

This essay was originally presented at an MLA convention panel convened by Elisabeth Ladenson. I am grateful to Elisabeth for having given me an opportunity to speak on this topic. In the months immediately following the convention, the essay benefited from conversations I was able to have with my new colleague Jason Puskar. I am especially grateful for this opportunity to discuss these issues with a member of the generation that the paper is explicitly responding to and worrying about, those trained in English studies after the rise of new historicism. I have found Jason a particularly articulate and generous representative of that cohort.

1. I want to thank Vincent Leitch for his question after I delivered an earlier version of this paper at the MLA Annual Convention, a question that made me realize the necessity for the following explanation.

2. DuBois notes the continuity of New Criticism and deconstruction, citing de Man's essay.

3. One of *Profession's* readers for this essay asked about genetic criticism, a recent literary critical movement hailing from France that involves research that is archival and yet that can also be called close reading. News of genetic criticism has not reached the English department circles where I mainly travel of late. Brought thus to consider

genetic criticism, albeit in a very cursory fashion, I would specify that whereas it involves archival textual work (research into diverse stages and versions of the text), the archival work that I had in mind in this essay is definitely contextual. The sort of archival research that has become all too familiar in English departments in the last decade, which I presumed the job candidate was talking about, involves looking at documents of diverse sorts from the period and place of a literary text—thus placing the text in cultural, social, or political history and understanding it primarily through that placement. The question about genetic criticism allows me to articulate that it is quite possible, indeed desirable, to combine archival research and close reading. My brief here is not against archival research but against the attrition of close reading.

4. I was not present at this panel. I heard an account of it, and of the mutual envy, in a talk given by Nancy K. Miller at another feminist conference a month or so later at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

5. This little piece of my analysis is connected to a larger sense of the productive potential in structures of mutual envy. See Gallop.

6. While I end on this gesture, whose perversity I enjoy, talking with Jason Puskar made me realize it would take another essay to explain it. It would probably also necessitate reopening the distinction I rejected between New Critical and deconstructive close reading. In this context, I will just say that in three decades of teaching I have found over and over that the very best way to discipline my students against their tendencies to make unfounded generalizations is to insist that they ground every claim they make in close reading.

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