

The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters

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No matter what course I'm teaching, I always teach the same thing—close reading. I teach a range of different courses: Women's Studies, Freud, Literary Theory, Feminist Theory, Deconstruction. We read a range of different texts: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Freud's *Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality*. The books cover a wide range of topics: art, race, literature, sex, discrimination against women. No matter the text, no matter the topic, I always teach the same thing—close reading.

You might notice that none of the books I mentioned, none of the courses, are, properly speaking, literature. In the courses I teach, we don't read poetry, drama, or fiction; we read nonfiction prose, stuff that could be loosely called theory. I work in an English department, and all the courses I offer are English courses. For me, what makes them English courses are not the books we read, but the way we read the books we read. Sometimes I think I could teach any text in an English course, because what matters to me, what makes me sure I'm teaching English, is how we read. In my English classes, I call the way we read "close reading."

I usually tell my students that "close reading" means looking at what is actually on the page, reading the text itself, rather than some idea "behind the text." It means noticing things *in the writing*, things in the writing that stand out. To give you some idea of what this means, I've made up a list of five sorts of things that a close reading might typically notice: (1) unusual vocabulary, words that surprise either because they are unfamiliar or because they seem to belong to a different context; (2) words that seem unnecessarily repeated, as if the word keeps insisting on being written; (3) images or metaphors, especially ones that are used repeatedly and are somewhat surprising given the context; (4) what is in italics or parentheses; and (5) footnotes that seem too long. This list is far from complete—in fact, no complete list is possible—but the list is meant to begin to give you an idea of what sorts of things we notice when we're doing close reading.

What all five of my examples have in common is that they are minor elements

in the text; they are not main ideas. In fact, your usual practice of reading which focuses on main ideas would dismiss them all as marginal or trivial. Another thing they have in common is that, although they are minor, they are nonetheless conspicuous, eye-catching: they are either surprising or repeated, set off from the text or too long. Close reading pays attention to elements in the text which, although marginal, are nonetheless emphatic, prominent—elements in the text which ought to be quietly subordinate to the main idea, but which textually call attention to themselves.

Most of you have been educated to ignore such elements. You have been taught to seek out and identify the main ideas, dismissing the trivial as you go. This has had to be trained into you: read to a young child sometime, you will notice she has the annoying habit of interrupting the flow of the story to draw attention to some minor thing. Close reading resembles the interruptions of that child. It is a method of undoing the training that keeps us to the straight and narrow path of main ideas. It is a way of learning not to disregard those features of the text that attract our attention, but are not principal ideas.

My third example above—images or metaphors—recalls one of the most classic sorts of reading done in college English classes, the image study. For generations now, students have learned in English classes to find the images in a work of literature and think about those images as a way of enhancing their understanding of the text. This might help you see why close reading would belong in an English class, how it connects to what is traditionally taught in English classes.

Traditionally, however, we have been taught to do image studies of literary texts, whereas in my classes we study the images in expository prose. You might say that I am taking the sort of reading developed as a way to more fully appreciate literature and applying it to a wider range of texts. You could describe the sort of close reading of all texts that I teach as a generalizing of literary reading so that, rather than a way to read a particular kind of text, it becomes a particular way to read all texts.

Students often tell me that my class has changed the way they read everything: newspapers, travel brochures, signs in shop windows. Their tone is frequently that of complaint (“your class is ruining me, making me hyperaware where once things went without saying”). But it is that special kind of complaint which carries a lot of pride. I hear such complaints as the most common evidence of what I call “education”—that is, when a student encounters something in class that affects the way she lives in the world. It makes sense to me that the experience of having learned something, of being in some way changed by that learning, would be expressed with this peculiar combination of resentment and pride (“Your class has contaminated all my reading”).

In explaining what I mean by close reading, I often tell my students to read NOT what SHOULD BE on the page but what IS. Over the years since first learning to read, we acquire the habit of reading what we think OUGHT TO be there rather than what actually is. You can test this by seeing how few people notice small typographical errors, how difficult in fact it is for people to catch all the typos in a text. (Even a

text proofread by several people will generally still have a couple of errors.) The problem is that people automatically correct what they're seeing without being conscious of it. So to ask people to read what is actually on the page, is to ask people to alter this pattern of automatic correction, to learn to become conscious of what they usually remain unconscious of, what is actually on the page.

This pattern of reading what ought to be there rather than what is can most easily be seen in relation to typos. While close reading is not primarily about noticing typographical errors, that is a useful side effect. Students trained in close reading generally become very good at catching typos. Even in this day of spell-check programs, this is still helpful, since the best spell-checker cannot catch typos that turn words into different words.

A more substantial benefit of close reading is the effect it can have upon the student's reading of her own writing. When we read our own writing, we are even more than usually prey to reading what *ought to be there* rather than what is. Often we don't notice that we've actually left words out or used words that don't mean what we mean or not explained something in a way anyone could follow. And that's because we know what ought to be there: we know what we were trying to say, and we read, not what we actually managed to get down on paper, but what we were trying to say.

More often than not, when I'm talking with a student about his paper, I find we're talking about two different objects. He is talking about the paper he thinks he wrote, which is the one he intended to write; I am talking about the paper he actually wrote. As a result, if I don't think the paper is very good, he thinks it means that I don't think his ideas are good, whereas in fact I am critical because I can't tell very well what his ideas are. When he reads his paper, he sees his ideas; when I read his paper, I see his words, which unfortunately don't manage to convey his ideas.

A student trained to close read would be more likely to read what she actually wrote. And thus she would be more able to see how it differs from what she intended to write. Practically, that means she would be better equipped to revise her writing, to make it correspond more closely to her intention. That close reading can help students write better is another reason it belongs in an English class. Besides teaching students to read better, the other central task of English is teaching students to write better.

Helping students write better is a substantial benefit and argues strongly for the value of close reading. But it is not actually the argument I want to make here. I have bigger fish to fry.

While a world that writes better is a world I'd certainly like to see, the sort of improvement in writing we're talking about is merely instrumental. Whatever thought a student might have, close reading will help him express it more clearly. As a teacher of writing, that is my simple, though by no means easy, goal. But as a teacher, I would not only like my students to become technically more proficient; I have more ambitious goals.

While I pride myself on my ability to get students to write better, regardless of

what they want to say, I want to resist the instrumentalism that would turn the teaching of English into the mere transmission of some amoral technical ability. Close reading can make students write better, but as much as I value good writing, that is simply not enough.

If we only read things written by ourselves, close reading wouldn't be very important. It is when we read things written by others that we begin to grasp the real value of close reading.

In concentrating on how close reading is useful in getting us to see the faults in our own writing, we focus on the difference between what we actually write and what we intend to write. And as good as it is to learn to hear what we actually say, as opposed to what we thought we said, in such a situation we generally have the advantage of knowing our intentions, even when we're not very adept at expressing them.

When we read our own writing, we tend to see, not what we actually wrote, but what we intended to write—that is, we read not the words on the page, but our thoughts. Likewise, I'm sorry to say, when we read what someone else wrote, we tend to see, not what he actually wrote, but what we think he would have written. Once again rather than seeing what is there in front of us, we see *our* thoughts.

Whereas in reading our own writing, we merely fail to see our own inadequate expression, in reading the writing of others, our failure is much more serious: we read our own ideas in place of what the other person has written. There's a technical term for this: it's called projection. Rather than read what the other person has actually written, we project onto the page what we think he would have written.

It's amazing how much reading is really projection. In fact, I would say that most of the time most people read not what is in front of them but what they expect to find in front of them.

Often the difference doesn't matter that much. Often what is in front of us is pretty similar to what we expect to find. A letter from Mom is generally similar to previous letters from Mom; this week's *People* magazine is very much like last week's; a novel by Jane Austen is very much like other Austen novels; one *Harlequin* romance is pretty much like another; a comedy by Shakespeare has the same structure as other comedies; one neo-conservative attack on "political correctness" resembles another; a feminist critique of pornography is likely to say what we expect it to say.

Those things which conform to our expectations are things which resemble what we have read before, things where we have learned what to expect. English teachers call this similarity "genre." Writings in the same genre will follow the same pattern; experienced readers of the genre will learn the pattern and know by and large what is coming. This is, of course, too simplistic. While the new *Harlequin* romance will mainly conform to the genre, it probably will have a few surprising details.

Rare is the text that does not, to some extent, belong to a genre; even texts which seem shockingly original often participate unwittingly in familiar patterns. Equally rare is the text which completely follows the rules of a genre: even the most

conventional will usually display some individual expressivity, some originality in its details. A text generally engages the expectations of genre *and* also varies from or even breaks those expectations, combining the surprising and the familiar.

When the reader concentrates on the familiar, she is reassured that what she already knows is sufficient in relation to this new book. Focusing on the surprising, on the other hand, would mean giving up the comfort of the familiar, of the already-known for the sake of learning, of encountering something new, something she didn't already know.

In fact, this all has to do with learning. Learning is very difficult; it takes a lot of effort. It is of course much easier if once we learn something we can apply what we have learned again and again. It is much more difficult if every time we confront something new, we have to learn something new.

Reading what one expects to find means finding what one already knows. Learning, on the other hand, means coming to know something one did not know before. Projecting is the opposite of learning. As long as we project onto a text, we cannot learn from it, we can only find what we already know. Close reading is thus a technique to make us learn, to make us see what we don't already know, rather than transforming the new into the old.

Close reading can thus be a crucial part of our education, the very sort of thing we most need from college. Close reading can equip us to learn, to be open to learning, to keep on learning all our life. Given the pace of change, there is no way you can learn everything you will need in life during your formal years of schooling. Thus the most valuable thing you could take from your education is the ability to learn. Close reading is a technique to maximize learning, one with wide application.

The difference between close reading and the way most people read most of the time is that, whereas it is generally agreed that it is the big picture that matters, close reading emphasizes small details. We have been trained to read a book globally: that is, to think of the book as a whole, identify its main idea, and understand all of its parts as fitting together to make up that whole. Close reading, on the other hand, is a technique for letting the whole book, the main argument, the global picture fade into the background. When we close read, we zero in on details but we do not immediately fit those details into our idea of the whole book. Instead we try to understand the details themselves as much as possible, to derive as much meaning as we can from them.

The reason for this is that the detail is the best possible safeguard against projection. It is the main idea or the general shape which is most likely to correspond to our preconceptions about the book. But we cannot so easily predict the details. So by concentrating on the details, we disrupt our projection; we are forced to see what is really there. When the reader learns to stop at the details, to notice them, and think about them, then the reader must account for what is actually written and cannot fall back on his expectations for what is in a book. I ask my students to notice surprising or insistent details because it is there that the student is most likely to find the text

as it exists, most likely to break free of his preconceptions of what should be in the text.

This will help the student learn better, all through her life; it will make her sharper and more adaptable, prepare her better for the surprises thrown in her path. This is a major benefit, but it is still a selfish gain. There is another, less selfish reason to practice close reading: I believe it makes for more ethical reading.

What do I mean by ethical? I believe it is ethical to respect other people, by which I mean: listen to them, try and understand what they are actually saying, rather than just confirming our preconceptions about them, our prejudices. I believe it is our ethical obligation to fight against our tendency to project our preconceptions, that it is our ethical duty to attempt to hear what someone else is really saying.

Ultimately, close reading is not just a way of reading but a way of listening. It can help us not just to read what is on the page, but to hear what a person really said. Close reading can train us to hear other people. In fact, I would argue that that is the most important benefit of close reading.

Our usual habits of reading are, to some extent, based on how we normally listen to spoken language. Because spoken language exists in time, not space, we catch what we can, forming impressions as we go along. We don't usually have the opportunity to go back and hear it again, to compare what we thought we heard with what was really said. And most often that is exactly how we read. We read along as fast as we are able, catching what we can, forming impressions. Not actually taking advantage of the fact that written language exists in space.

Close reading slows us down, stopping us at words, getting us to look around at the context of the words that stopped us, making us remember similar words and go back and look for them. Close reading takes advantage of the material permanence of the text to look at what is on the page, rather than to rely on our impressions. Close reading takes the fullest advantage of the difference between writing and speech, between reading and listening. We do not have to rely on our faulty memory, our necessarily subjective impressions. We can go back and look at the page; we can pause over things that surprise or puzzle us. We might even say that close reading *is* reading, if we define reading as how we greet writing in contradistinction to how we encounter speech.

And yet—even while close reading means learning to take advantage of the physical permanence of writing to do what we cannot with speech—a practiced close reader will begin to listen to speech in a way influenced by close reading. Whereas most of the time most people read writing as if they were listening to speech, training in close reading can reverse that—we can learn to listen to speech with an attentiveness resembling what close reading pays to the text.

It will of course always be more difficult to “close listen” than to close read. In most circumstances we cannot easily stop at a surprising phrase, question and analyze it. In most speech situations we can't take the time to ponder an unexpected word. But close reading, by teaching us to see the difference between what we expect

and what is actually written, can make us aware of that difference, suspicious of our tendency to project, can teach us to listen better, to catch the actual words, to remark—as best we can even in passing—the specificity of what is said.

Close reading can prepare us for this difficult task by giving us the habit of noticing unexpected words and allowing them to shake up our preconceived notions. Close reading schools us for the truly hard and really valuable task of learning to hear what the other is saying, not what we expect him to say, not a general impression of what he is saying, but—as much as possible—what he is actually, literally saying.

Listening to the other is in fact the ethical principle behind a major trend in college English today. In the last decade or two, there has been a decisive opening up of the list of authors commonly taught in colleges. English classes are reading more women authors and more authors of color (African-American, Native-American, Caribbean, African, Latino, “post-colonial” women and men). This movement is often called multiculturalism, sometimes called diversity. It has been debated, raised temperatures and voices, elicited champions, and been treated as a threat. I don’t want to rehearse the debates here. I simply want to mention the fact that the teaching of English has opened up the lists of its authors so that it is much much more common to read an author of color and/or a woman author than it was a generation ago.

I bring up “multiculturalism” not for itself, but because of its relation to close reading. To be sure, “close reading” is not generally associated with multiculturalism. On the contrary, it is often considered actually to be on the other side of the debate.

In college teaching, “close reading” has historically been associated with the so-called “new criticism,” which was the dominant mode of English teaching from the 1950s through the 1970s. New criticism taught two generations of college students how to read literary texts, especially poetry. As a mode of close reading, it allowed students to appreciate the complexity of literary writing, to see the artful work, rather than merely themes and ideas. As an effective means of teaching literature, it spread through college campuses. It was definitely a great classroom method: anyone could be taught to close read; it did not demand the kind of background knowledge necessary for other types of literary study. It worked well with students who did not already have a good background in high culture. There was, actually, a populist direction to “new criticism”: it opened the way for any student, regardless of the cultural background she brought to class, to really encounter the text. The student didn’t have to have the advantage of a literary family life or prep school exposure; all she needed was patience and perspicacity.

But in “new criticism” this populist direction was always linked to something not nearly so open. The new criticism believed that only the best writing was worthy of such close reading; furthermore, it believed that the “best writing” was a rather restricted canon of traditional literature, almost exclusively written by men of European descent. When in the 1980s feminism and multiculturalism laid siege to

the canon of college literature, the canon under attack was in fact the “new critical” canon, a list of major works sanctified by two generations of new critical teaching.

Because “close reading” is historically associated with “new criticism,” and because “new criticism” is associated with a restricted white, male canon of literature, close reading has been, for many advocates of diversity, guilty by association.

Now, given my promotion of the ethical value of listening to the other, you might expect me to believe—as I in fact do—in diversity. I think it an invaluable part of an education to read authors who can describe experiences that differ from the student’s experience. I think reading authors with diverse backgrounds can open the student to the world’s diversity, to viewpoints different than the student’s own. But, as much as I think it beneficial to have a truly diverse group of authors on college reading lists, I know that is simply not enough. Genuine openness to diversity needs more than diversely representative authors. As much as *who* we read—even more, I would say—it matters *how* we read.

One of the unmistakable signs of progress today is the fact that students read African-American women authors in college English classes. Whereas a generation ago few if any students would ever have been assigned anything by a black woman in a college English course, students today are generally assigned at least one book written by a black woman. It is surely good for the students who are not black women to have to take seriously what a black woman has written. (Not to mention how it might be good for the students who happen themselves to be black women.) But the simple fact of assigning a text will not assure that the students actually hear what a black woman might have to say.

There are a lot of stereotypes about black women circulating in our culture—to say the least. A lot of these stereotypes are bad, but some are good; many are horribly denigrating, and some are even ennobling. Advocates of multiculturalism hope that reading black women authors will help see their viewpoint rather than viewing them according to our stereotypes. The problem is that just reading a text, the way most people read most of the time, will not disrupt the reader’s stereotypes. The reader will use her stereotypes—her preconceived notions, the ideas she brings with her into her encounter with the text—to help her understand what she is reading. Reading like that, she is quite likely to find confirmation for her prejudices.

Reading as she is accustomed to read, the student will seize upon those things in the text that conform to her expectations. She is much less likely to observe things that do not fit her preconceptions; she may not even notice things that directly contradict her preconceptions. Unlike customary reading, close reading is a method to help the student notice what does not conform to her stereotypes.

Stereotypes about “the other”—the other sex, the racialized other—are in fact technically projections. They derive from our notions of the self, and belong to a simplistic opposition of self versus other. Within that way of thinking, which is in fact the way we usually think about the other, “the other” is always derivative, based

on how we understand the self. When we encounter another person, either we presume he is the same as us or we put him in the category of our other. And if in the latter category, we then presume he is our opposite, strong where we are weak and weak where we are strong. We tend to view the other as a photographic negative of our image of the self.

The projected other can in fact be either bad or good; what is consistent is that he is our polar opposite. So, for example, if we understand our self as complex, our other must be simple. Value here can go either way: if simple means stupid, complex means knowledgeable, worldly, sophisticated, cultured; but if simple means healthy, wholesome, down-to-earth, complex means neurotic, convoluted, unnatural. While “the other” is always constructed out of projected stereotypes, those stereotypes can be demeaning or flattering.

The noble savage and the selfless nurturing mother are two classic examples of “positive stereotypes”: here the other is good in contrast to the self’s selfishness. I want to make you aware of positive stereotypes because I fear that, in our fervor to counter the more obviously hurtful negative stereotypes (the other as inferior, less than human), if we do not pay close attention to what we read, our reading for diversity will only end up projecting such positive stereotypes.

I can’t tell you how many papers I’ve read in which students attempt to prove that the black woman author or character is wiser and better than us all, falling back on classic positive stereotypes of which the students are not even aware. Not just students either, but all too many of my right-thinking colleagues across the country. Such projection in fact may well constitute the most common form of reading.

If students today think they ought to take Toni Morrison as the very fount of wisdom, it has everything to do with long-engrained habits of reading so-called great literature. For example, this is precisely the way generations of students have been encouraged to read Shakespeare. And Shakespeare is an excellent case in point for demonstrating the sort of wholistic projective reading I hope here to make suspect.

Shakespeare has long been taught as a “great writer,” which has meant not only that his writing is great (his writing is in fact fabulous), but that he is a keen observer of human nature, a superior thinker—more than that, that *everything he wrote* is a gem of beauty *and wisdom*. In the 1970s, feminists began to notice that some of what Shakespeare said was sexist, demeaning to women, denying women full humanity. In the eighties, a like move found evidence of racism in Shakespeare. Now the fact that this guy living four hundred years ago in England was both sexist and racist should not have been earthshaking news. But it was.

People who loved Shakespeare but hated sexism and racism became desperate. Many did devilishly clever readings to prove that Shakespeare was really a feminist, if one just knew how to interpret. As clever (and at times even convincing) as these readings were, there was a breathlessness to them that suggested fear. People who loved Shakespeare were afraid that if he were sexist or racist he could no longer be

a great writer. They feared he would fall from great to bad, be dismissed, and we would lose the pleasure of his writing.

The counterpoint to this fearful defensiveness is another common scene of cultural struggle today. All too often smart, ambitious students read a book looking for what's wrong with it, using a mental checklist to look for sexism, racism, or something else from the ever-growing list of official prejudices so they can dismiss it. If it fails the checklist they feel they don't have to deal with it, don't have to learn what's inside. This implies that if a book isn't perfect, all-knowing, then it is worthless.

The irony is that the mental checklist is itself a prejudice. "Prejudice" from pre-judge, to form a judgment about something before actually encountering it, before coming to know it. Coming to a book armed with a mental checklist is as much a prejudice as sexism (that is, judging an individual woman according to preconceptions about what women should be rather than on her own merits). Fighting prejudice with prejudice is an all too common practice, but one I don't recommend. To my mind the best way to fight prejudice is in fact close reading, challenging one's pre-judgments through close encounters with the other.

We have been encouraged to read for or against. Not so much in our most literary reading, but specifically in relation to anything we take to be nonfiction, not mere entertainment. And then we tend to read as if a book is either completely good or completely heinous. When we like a book, or an author, or even a genre, when we identify with the argument, believe it to be right, we assume that we should like everything in the book. I have seen readers of otherwise great sophistication do ingenious contortions in order to deny that there is anything they do not like about a book which they have reason to prize. The flip side of this is that all too often when a reader has come to see something that offends her in a book, she will then completely condemn it, dismiss it as worthless. And it is not unusual to see a reader go from excessive admiration to complete dismissal when denial is overcome by the recognition of flaw. Once considered perfect, the book becomes all too quickly, imperfection now admitted, worthless.

This polarization yields two different reading stances, both equally totalizing and projective. Either we assume a book is great, wise, admirable, and read it lovingly looking for instances of its wisdom, ignoring those things that seem wrong or off to us. Or we assume a book is bad, stupid, dangerous, and read it aggressively looking for examples of its stupidity, ignoring those things that we might actually like or agree with.

Worse still, we don't just treat books this way; all too often this is how we greet people. Our encounters are all too often polarized, totalizing, and projective. Either you are just like me or you are my opposite. Either you are always good or you are the devil incarnate. Either I love you or you are my enemy. All's fair in love and war means very simply, we can project whatever we want, we are released from the ethical obligation to listen fairly to what the other is saying.

Now, don't take my reference to "love and war" to mean I'm opposed to passion. In fact, I find it heartening when students treat books like people, when they bring to their reading the passions that make them love or hate a book. I am heartened because, if a person can bring passion to reading, then there is hope she can be taught to bring reading to passion.

By "reading" here, I mean of course close reading, learning to hear what's really on the page, listening closely to the other, and being willing to catch what the other actually says, and able to hear what we didn't expect him to say. If we can learn to do that with books, we might learn to do that with people. Reading, by which I now mean close reading, can school us for all our close encounters. And then maybe, just maybe, we could learn not only to read better but to fight and love more fairly. To hear a little better what our enemy or our beloved might actually be saying. To resist demonizing and idolizing, but instead to fight and love other humans.

That would be not just an ethics for reading, a way to read more ethically, but a reading for ethics, close reading as a means to a more just treatment of others.