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SYMPOSIUM: What Should College English Be?

Should College English Be Close Reading?

Don Bialostosky

When we have succeeded, our students practice a kind of sensitivity to language and to other people as they employ language—a kind of listening and responding that in its combination of sympathy and criticism is always in short supply.

—Wayne Booth, *The Vocation of a Teacher*, p. 75

When I was first asked what college English should be, I was tempted to answer an enthusiastic “yes” to the question in my title and jump on the “close reading” bandwagon. It is crowded these days with critics of widely divergent tribes, some of whom have gotten on by themselves and others of whom have been loaded aboard by genial smoothers-over of their differences.¹ I was tempted, for, after all, the college course I am most deeply invested in teaching—we call it Introduction to Critical Reading at Pitt—cultivates a kind of close reading, and the phrase “close reading” would affiliate what I’m doing there with courses taught by numerous colleagues at the college level (and many at the secondary level). So also would the course’s titular phrase “critical reading,” which is sometimes identified with “close reading” but more often separated from it, an uncertain distinction that gives me the first reason to pause before climbing aboard.²

If “close” and “critical” differ at all, is it in their *distance* from the text they attend to, the one getting up close and attending to detail, the other standing back to observe and judge?³ To literalize the spatial metaphor reveals its absurdity, for we

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realize that the only visual issue of distance from texts on the page is the ability to resolve the letters—not too far or too close to make them out—but that once they are in view, closeness or distance has no impact on reading them. To say that a reading is “close,” then, leaves everything up for grabs, and that of course may be why the word continues to be so appealing. It roughly distinguishes projects committed to reading texts from those interested in questions collateral to reading them, and it has a vaguely ethical air of making that reading attentive and careful, but it leaves entirely to the discretion (or to the unexamined predispositions) of “close” readers what they attend to or what they make of what they attend to.

Paying close attention doesn’t guarantee even minimal understanding or response. We can, after all, carefully attend to an utterance in a language we can’t translate, or we can carefully decode words and still not put together sentences, or we can carefully construe the sentences and still not get the “drift” of the speaker, or we can carefully take the “drift” and not know how to respond to it or what it is responding to. Starting at the other end, we can take the drift and know how to respond without attending carefully to the words and sentences at all.

Close reading as practiced by the New Critics, who are credited with initiating it in college English, started at the latter end—at the end at which student readers of poems imagined that they could take the drift and know how to respond—and redirected students’ close attention back to the words, teaching them to expand the range of the words’ meanings and to discover patterns in their relations to one another that revealed ironies, ambiguities, or paradoxes that undermined the students’ easy initial uptake and sense of how to respond. The New Critics were really teaching students to unread a first reading and to reread to a deeper, initially hidden one that might be epitomized in a symbol or formulated, albeit inadequately, in a theme.

The New Critics were so successful in promulgating and institutionalizing this practice that our students come to college English convinced that they can’t understand poetry, or literature more generally, because they have learned to distrust their initial uptake in order to highlight certain words and build from them a reading that will satisfy what they have learned is an institutional demand for deeper, hidden, symbolic meanings. I agree with Robert Scholes, who documents the pervasiveness of this practice, that this kind of close reading is a problem college English must address and not a practice it should continue. Like the five-paragraph essay, it is an artifact of a successful pedagogy in the schools, one that is teachable, testable, and perhaps even functional under certain conditions, but dysfunctional within the full domain of discursive practices college English should be concerned with. So, paradoxically, I must conclude that close reading in its institutionalized New Critical instantiation has created the habits and expectations of reading literature that college English needs to resist and reform, or at least articulate and examine, not the habits and expectations it should uncritically cultivate.

Our problem in college English, as I see it, is not that students read literature with the unexamined resources they use to engage in everyday discursive exchange but that they check those resources at the classroom door, trained to believe them irrelevant to the special hermeneutic task that literature teachers require of them. Our problem is that students have learned to distrust their repertoires of discursive knowledge and expectations and have never been encouraged to reflect upon them and to deploy them in the distinctive and interesting tasks of reading that literary works invite. If you wanted, as I do not, to call reading grounded in these repertoires “close reading,” it would be because they would bring literary works closer to *students*, to the discourse they know and use, instead of distancing, even alienating those works from the language students already know how to use and enjoy. In this sense we could polemically characterize New Critical reading not as close but, as it sometimes has been characterized, elitist, sacerdotal, allegorical. It distances poetry from ordinary language and students’ everyday experience and sets it apart in another realm of meaning than they are accustomed to inhabit, a sacralized realm of art to some, a realm of school meanings to others.

I am not concerned, however, to appropriate the phrase “close reading” for the teaching of reading as I am proposing to rethink it; the phrase already obscures too many differences among a variety of reading practices in addition to the New Critical. I want instead to open a space for considering alternatives to New Critical close reading by marking out, without naming, *a pedagogical space where we teach productive attentiveness to literary texts*, the curricular space that New Critical close reading has so long occupied that we frequently call it “close reading” by default, just as we call all facial tissue “Kleenex.” To name that space with anything but a circumlocution at this point in our history is to risk falling back into old patterns. “Critical reading,” too, is as large a portmanteau as “close reading” and easily collapses into it. Even “reading,” portentously shorn of all modifiers, has been appropriated by de Manian deconstruction to name a practice self-consciously indebted to New Critical reading for deeper meaning—though for de Man, that meaning is an allegory of undecidable import, just as opposed to everyday first reading as New Critical paradox is (see de Man).

In an earlier round of this debate, Peter Rabinowitz’s argument “Against Close Reading” documented a circling of the (un)critical wagons around the “requirement of close reading” by major theorists in the wake of the theory boom, and our recent revivers of the phrase have displayed the same hegemonic confidence, ignoring critics like Rabinowitz and Scholes and many others to reassert, as George Levine does in the blurb on the back cover of *Close Reading* (Lentricchia and DuBois), the “necessity” of “close reading” to “serious criticism.” Even Gerald Graff, who, according to Rabinowitz, was once accused of “a major treason against the profession” by J. Hillis Miller for an earlier attack on close reading (231), closes ranks on the back

of *Close Reading* to declare “that the alleged death of close reading at the hand of theory and the turn away from literary works themselves have been greatly exaggerated.” Perhaps it should give us all pause that both Gayatri Spivak and Camille Paglia have touted “close reading” in recent books.

To prompt fresh thought on “the pedagogical space where we teach productive attentiveness to literary texts” and on what kind of “productive attentiveness” to what features of what texts we might wish to foster there, college English (perhaps *College English*) needs to call a moratorium on reaffirmations of “close reading” and call for an examination of the reading practices covered by that phrase and proposed as alternatives to them. We do not need anthologies that glibly blur the differences among recycled essays from all-too-familiar critics; we need review essays that distinguish what those critics and others with salient projects for productive attentiveness to literary texts are teaching when they teach their students to read.

Those essays might address some of the following questions, among others. To what features of the poem or literary work or text do they direct attention? How do they articulate the relations among those features? What questions do they think are most fruitful in directing their students’ attention and to what sorts of evidence do they point their students in answering those questions? How do they divide, subordinate, and sequence the parts of what they think worth teaching? How do they articulate the relation between what is “in” the text and what is “outside” it? How do they situate the poetic or literary work in relation to discourse in other spheres of communication including the vernacular and institutional ones from which their students come? How do they situate it in relation to other literary texts? In relation to historical and cultural texts? What do they teach their students that literary works do, and what do they teach the students to do with them? What traditions, arts, and disciplines inform their pedagogies—grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, linguistics, semiotics, ethics, politics, sociology, philosophy, among them—and from what sources in those disciplines do their reading practices draw? Could they offer a theoretical argument for their reading practice grounded in those arts and disciplines? Have they troubled themselves to articulate the practice they teach with other practices, to respond to criticisms addressed from other disciplines or sources, to differentiate their practices from those who teach under the same banner but teach differently? How much of their critical orientation to other schools and practitioners do they share with their students and how and when do they share it? What kind of writing do they ask their students to do, and how is it related to their reading?⁴

Elsewhere I have attempted to answer some of these questions about my own teaching of reading literature with terms I have drawn from the Bakhtin School, but I will not presume to put them forward in this brief polemic as the answer to the collective inquiry I am proposing; I will only point to them as contributions to it (see

Bialostosky “Teaching,” “From Discourse”). *College English* needs to cultivate patience in its contributors, soliciting their articulation and evaluation of pedagogies without insisting that their articles end with hastily cobbled-together alternatives to the erroneous views they have exposed or jerry-rigged solutions to the problems they have uncovered. Rabinowitz’s and Scholes’s critiques of New Critical pedagogies both suffer from premature and insufficiently thought-through offerings of alternatives, but the problems they wisely critique are so widespread and deeply embedded that the solutions might need the work of many colleagues over some time to address them. The New Criticism was the work of many hands over many years, its program a response to questions raised by I. A. Richards, its success a function of many people’s meeting, editing, teaching, and publishing. Deconstruction in this country also was collectively elaborated and institutionally fostered, even though it had its virtuoso performers.

We cannot expect to displace habitual and institutionalized practices with solo performances, however virtuoso they might be. A journal like *College English*, however, might be a rallying point, a site that fosters proposals about how to fill “the pedagogical space where we teach productive attentiveness to literary texts,” a forum for evaluating them. A special issue, a focused year, a continuing thread underwritten by conference sessions at the NCTE Annual Convention—I can imagine even an invitation to our colleagues in the schools, whom the New Critics did not neglect, to join in our inquiry and to share what we agree down the line to be “best practices” that might finally dislodge New Critical vestiges from their most firmly entrenched locations and force those of us in college English to think about a new problem—how and what we might teach students already proficient in the reading practices we consider most important. The day we might address that problem is nowhere in sight, awaiting our working through the prior questions of what those important reading practices are and how we defend and teach them. *College English* should be, among other things, an attempt to respond to those questions.

NOTES

1. See Lentricchia and DuBois, where critics from Cleanth Brooks to Homi Bhabha are marshaled under the rubric. The topic is alive in the blogosphere, where arguments like my own for rethinking what we are doing in the space of “close reading,” arguments for rejecting the practice, and assertions of its continuing importance come up among over 900,000 hits for the phrase. See for example, Bérubé; Chrisman and Phillips; Halberstam; Singh. The Web is full of syllabi and learning center Web sites offering instructions for how to do close readings.

2. The phrase “critical reading” comes up 1,320,000 or so times on the Web, 36,000 times in conjunction with “close reading.”

3. The second meaning of “critical” according to the OED is “exercising careful judgement or observation.”

4. For my own efforts to review reading practices and correlated teaching practices underwritten by a variety of contemporary critical schools including New Criticism, see Bialostosky, *Wordsworth*, especially Chapters 3 and 8.

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