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BRIEF REPORT

A Century of "Close Reading"

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Abstract

Students undertaking a close reading and scholars studying the practice ask the same question: *What exactly is "close reading"?* While we now associate the phrase with literary critics of the 1930s–1950s, they themselves infrequently invoked it as a term of art. Since then, scholars have struggled to define close reading beyond the vague notion of reading with "attention to the words on the page." While compiling the bibliography for John Guillory's book *On Close Reading*, I created a free online archive, which gathers over 2,500 statements on the practice: www.closereadingarchive.org. In harvesting key quotations from this archive, this cento adheres to Edward Said's insight: "single phrases" can "contain a whole library of meanings." What follows is not an explicit argument so much as a roadmap of distilled claims about the topic, with each successive entry sometimes recalling previous ones, or introducing new turns of the subject – all offering provocations to further thought. Whether from critics well known or lesser known, to poets who have commented on the subject, to government reports and school catalogs, the items cumulatively corroborate that close reading has persisted as the heart of the critical enterprise. I hope, of course, that these excerpts entice readers to survey the online archive and thereby assemble their own alternative accounts.

Keywords: Close reading

1 Writers and their close readers are certainly the **strongest forces in literature**.

—*Boris Tomashevsky* (1925)

2 Close reading is **absolutely essential** to those who are going to do work in literature.

—*Osmond T. Robert* (1926)

3 A close reading of the sonnet **forces us to understand it**.

—*Ruth C. Wallerstein* (1927)

4 It is time to **return to close reading**.

—*Louis Aragon* (1928)

5 All respectable poetry **invites close reading**.

—*I. A. Richards* (1929)

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6 Nothing in [Arnold's] prose work, therefore, **will stand very close analysis.**

—*T. S. Eliot* (1930)

7 Close reading shows **the dominance of the factual over the sensuous** in the poetry [of Dryden and Pope].

—*Martha Pfaff* (1931)

8 I think you sometimes read with your eye **a little too close to the page**.

—*Conrad Aiken* (1932)

9 **A cumulative deposit** remains in their minds from sustained and close reading.

—*William S. Knickerbocker* (1933)

10 We should recognize the value of close reading in **the training of superior students** especially.

—*Tom B. Haber* (1934)

11 A man like Valéry emerges from his books **without a close reading**.

—*Wallace Stevens* (1935)

12 Make close reading **a necessity for getting the story**.

—*Bulletin of the Texas State Department of Education* (1936)

13 Critics who have written about [*The Awkward Age*] seem to have found it **not worth the extremely close and alert reading it demands**.

—*F. R. Leavis* (1937)

14 I think to fill in the time quietly by forcing myself to do a Horace Walpole sketch for America. Why not? **It means close reading**; alien matter; & just time to do it.

—*Virginia Woolf* (1938)

15 A course in the close reading of lyric poetry with attempt to decide **what constitutes critical comment**.

—*Bread Loaf School of English Catalog* (1939)

16 Dr. Bernard's "close reading" of my close reading of Thurstone was apparently **not quite close enough**.

—*Robert K. Merton* (1940)

17 Never before…have we had **so much close reading**.

—*Norman Foerster* (1941)

18 Close reading **for what, when, of how much** of a play or novel?

—*Christine M. Gibson* (1942)

19 Only lately, and **thanks mainly to the influence of Mr. I. A. Richards**, has anyone tried again to teach poetry as Bowyer seems to have taught Shakespeare and Milton.

—*Arthur Mizener* (1943)

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20 The sort of **close reading that has to precede translation** has dropped out of education.

—*Louis C. Zahner* (1944)

21 **Careful analysis of the texts themselves** by a class under the guidance of the teacher results in close reading and sober judgment.

—*Herbert Weisinger* (1945)

22 Coleridge has a method…it is **the method of close reading**.

—*Howard Hall Creed* (1946)

23 To see this plainly will **require a closer reading than most of us give** to poetry.

—*Cleanth Brooks* (1947)

24 Close reading…can only be understood on **the analogy of microscopic analysis.**

—*Stanley Edgar Hyman* (1948)

25 A course in close reading is **inescapably necessary**.

—*Raymond Williams* (1949)

26 I think "close reading" would be **a better phrase than New Criticism**.

—*Malcolm Cowley* (1950)

27 **Biblical exegesis** (doubtless the archetype of our literary "close reading" of texts).

—*Austin Warren* (1951)

28 "Close-reading" **(a cant phrase of the antibiographist)**.

—*Leslie A. Fiedler* (1952)

29 For all the "close" reading they recommend, there appears to be in colleges **less general reading**.

—*Van Wyck Brooks* (1953)

30 The ability to read closely is **a skill that you need to use often**.

—*Martha Gray et al.* (1954)

31 Close reading is in error when it **takes the work away from the author**.

—*Walter Havighurst* (1955)

32 The potentially valuable emphasis on "close reading" often has been nullified also by the creation of **routine formulae for analysis**.

—*Louise M. Rosenblatt* (1956)

33 Hundreds of American books are receiving now almost **their first "close" reading**.

—*Randall Stewart* (1957)

34 "Close" reading has **not yet perceptibly increased the affection of the public** for fiction and poetry.

—*Don Geiger* (1958)

35 Leavis' close reading [of Shelley] is in fact **a simple misreading**.

—*Harold Bloom* (1959)

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36 There is **no substitute for close reading**.

—*R. P. Hewett* (1960)

37 The habit of close reading had **declined with the decline of classical education**.

—*Douglas Bush* (1961)

38 The current reactions against "close" criticism…often give evidence that **these mechanical versions have been equated with the whole approach**.

—*Reuben A. Brower & Richard Poirier* (1962)

39 Today one senses danger from **the over-anxiety of some teachers** to train their pupils in close reading.

—*L. C. Knights* (1963)

40 A technique of close reading unrelated to a genuine sensitivity to literary value can in itself be of **no more significance than a skill in doing crossword puzzles**.

—*David Daiches* (1964)

41 Close reading **(a dying art in our soap-selling culture)**.

—*Richard Starnes* (1965)

42 **Linguistics** is just one form of training in close reading.

—*Roger Fowler* (1966)

43 As so often, when it comes to actual close reading **the students reveal that they cannot do it**.

—*David Holbrook* (1967)

44 Too much close reading can **drive one out of his mind**.

—*Dennis Rygiel* (1968)

45 There is no real evidence that close reading itself affects either **the quantity or quality of what students produce**.

—*James Hoetker* (1969)

46 Surely we **absorbed the cultural values** inherent in close reading.

—*Richard Ohmann* (1970)

47 "Close reading"…remains curiously timid when challenged to **reflect upon its own self-consciousness**.

—*Paul de Man* (1971)

48 Today the school of New Critics seems to have passed into history, but their **methods of close reading can be discerned not far below the surface** of most serious analysis of poetry.

—*Lawrence I. Lipking & A. Walton Litz* (1972)

49 These new critics of literature replaced the pseudoscience of philology with **the pseudoscience of the "close reading."**

—*John V. Fleming* (1973)

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50 The possibly **dead-ended process of close reading** that we learned at our fathers' knees.

—*Vern Rutsala* (1974)

51 [Vendler's] kind of "close reading" is pretty much **beyond me, I'm afraid**.

—*Elizabeth Bishop* (1975)

52 **We are all New Critics now**, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape…the requirement of "close reading."

—*Jonathan Culler* (1976)

53 Two-thirds of close reading is **simply learning about the existence of the *OED***, and the other third is learning how to use it.

—*William C. Dowling* (1977)

54 The method of close reading became the **pedagogical weapon of the New Criticism**.

—*René Wellek* (1978)

55 The methodology of "close reading" was an attempt not to imitate science but **to refute its devaluation of literature**.

—*Gerald Graff* (1979)

56 The authority of language **can only be tested** by close reading.

—*Geoffrey Hartman* (1980)

57 **Deconstruction** is exactly close reading.

—*Mary Jacobus* (1981)

58 Close reading of literary texts is the ground that **nearly all theories and methods build upon** or seek to occupy.

—*William E. Cain* (1982)

59 I could commend close reading, but only as **an initial strategy**.

—*Stephen Greenblatt* (1983)

60 Close reading **of any critical complexion** is what this volume advocates.

—*Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* (1984)

61 The preparation of a finished close reading was **not incompatible with an historical procedure**.

—*Jerome McGann* (1985)

62 The real point of close reading is that **it produces the right sort of person** —a person of evident worth.

—*Anthony Grafton & Lisa Jardine* (1986)

63 There's **nothing more tedious** than endlessly close reading.

—*Frank Kermode* (1987)

64 **One just goes to work** doing or teaching "close reading."

—*J. Hillis Miller* (1988)

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65 **Translation** is essentially the closest reading one can possibly give a text.

—*Gregory Rabassa* (1989)

66 There is **no substitute for close reading**.

—*André Bleikasten* (1990)

67 Close reading is **what I want to happen**.

—*Clifford Geertz* (1991)

68 Close reading rests precariously on **a number of shaky assumptions**.

—*Peter J. Rabinowitz* (1992)

69 It is foolish to attempt a close reading of a poem **in a language one doesn't know**.

—*Louise Glück* (1993)

70 While the "close reading" de Man recommends is an act of respect for, and receptiveness to, the text itself, it **cannot give access to what the text denies, excludes, or distorts**.

—*Barbara Johnson* (1994)

71 Close reading has **never been close enough**.

—*Isobel Armstrong* (1995)

72 I would rather think of a close reader as someone who goes inside a room and **describes the architecture**.

—*Helen Vendler* (1996)

73 Close reading…runs on **a thirty-year cycle**.

—*Shawn Rosenheim* (1997)

74 **Political, ethical and juridical responsibility** requires a task of infinite close reading.

—*Jacques Derrida* (1998)

75 The method of close reading was **never provided with an adequate theoretical ground**.

—*Mary Poovey* (1999)

76 The United States is **the country of close reading**.

—*Franco Moretti* (2000)

77 What surprises me, though, and heartens me, is **the survival through all these changes** of some commitment to close reading.

—*Stanley Fish* (2001)

78 One must not be **afraid of close reading**.

—*Umberto Eco* (2002)

79 As a term, *close reading* hardly seems to leave **the realm of so-called common sense**, where it would appear to mean something understandable and vague.

—*Andrew DuBois* (2003)

80 Perhaps **there is finally no alternative** to what was called in the Bad Old Days, *close reading*.

—*Marjorie Perloff* (2004)

81 There's **nothing elitist** about close reading.

—*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (2005)

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82 **All textuality**, when subjected to close reading, can be said to be queer.

—*Carla Freccero* (2006)

83 We all believe in close reading; **the problem is how to do it**.

—*Hayden White* (2007)

84 The practice of close reading is tacitly viewed by many literary scholars as **the mark of their tribe**.

—*Rita Felski* (2008)

85 The negotiation with close reading is never finished but **always getting under way**.

—*Roland Greene* (2009)

86 Close reading is at **the heart of literary studies**.

—*Heather Love* (2010)

87 The ethics of close reading has something to do with **respecting what is alive, what is living in theory.**

—*Jane Gallop* (2011)

88 Close reading adopts a stance that takes **the work as an end in itself**.

—*Eric Hayot* (2012)

89 Big data render [close reading] **totally inappropriate as a method** of studying literary history.

—*Matthew Jockers* (2013)

90 The intensities of close reading cannot help but **distort their object**.

—*Lauren Berlant* (2014)

91 Close reading is not, and **has never been, politically neutral**.

—*Andy Hines* (2015)

92 **The now often undervalued practice** of close reading was surprising and fresh when it began in English studies.

—*Marjorie Garber* (2016)

93 Why did it take so long to start writing **the history of close reading?**

—*Angus Connell Brown* (2017)

94 The report of **the death of close reading** was an exaggeration.

—*Eric Weiskott* (2018)

95 Close reading is **not just a skill but an *activity***.

—*Robert Eaglestone* (2019)

96 More poems have been **close-read in classrooms** than in published articles.

—*Rachel Sagner Buurma & Laura Heffernan* (2020)

97 Reading literature closely is **a counter-cultural activity**.

—*Kent Cartwright* (2021)

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98 **Theory without close reading** is empty, but **close reading without theory** is blind.

—*Steven Shaviro* (2022)

99 Close reading isn't reading. **It's writing**.

—*Jonathan Kramnick* (2023)

100 Close reading seems to have become **the victim of its own success**.

—*Marshall Brown* (2024)

101 The difficulty of defining close reading is an entailment of **its nature *as technique***.

—*John Guillory* (2025)

*[Formatting note: upon the suggestion of editor Jeffrey Wilson, I have introduced the **bold highlighting**.]*

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