theories and methodologies

Surprise Me If You Can

NIRVANA TANOUKHI

Hey! Whatcha readin' for?

—Bill Hicks, comedian, *Sane Man* (1989)

Miller Reads So the Chinese (and Young, Western Computer Gamers) Don't Have To

IN AUGUST 2010, I ATTENDED A LECTURE THAT J. HILLIS MILLER GAVE AT THE SHANGHAI JIAO TONG UNIVERSITY ON THE CHALLENGE OF READING world literature. The lecture argued that in a globalizing world, traveling literature grows distant from its linguistic milieu, local readership, and aesthetic context, making it our challenge to find a reading method that could safeguard these endangered aspects of the text's specificity. To do this, he proposed to imagine himself as a Chinese anthologist who, wishing to include a translation of William Butler Yeats's poem "The Cold Heaven" in a Chinese anthology of world literature, must ask himself, "Just what would I need to tell Chinese readers to make them the best possible readers of this poem?" Miller concluded that, as that anthologist, he would need to give them the facts about Yeats's life and works, an account of the generic rules of the poem's verse form, a note on the broad recurrence of "sudden" and "suddenly" in Yeats's oeuvre, information about "[w]hat sort of bird the rook is and why they are delighted by cold weather," a clarification of the differing connotations of "heaven" and "skies" for Christian readers familiar with "The Lord's Prayer," an explanation of what the oxymoron "burning ice" has meant in the Western poetic tradition, a pointer to the allusion in the word "crossed" to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and some sense of the embedded subtext of Yeats's failure to woo Maud Gonne (256).[1] For, according to Miller (citing David Damrosch), when culturally distant readers are not made aware of the "vast substratum beneath" a poem, they are "likely to impose domestic literary values on the foreign work" (254). In short, a respectful reading method must ensure that such readers are guided through the text, in the light of its original context.

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PMLA 131.5 (2016), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But then Miller proceeds to add that when it comes to Yeats, what an external reader needs to be told differs little whether the reader is Chinese or a "computer-games-playing Western young person ignorant of European poetry." The fact is, neither could be expected to perform a historical interpretation, a "high-level culturally embedded reading." A more reasonable aim would, accordingly, have to be a contextually informed "making sense" of the poem (256). The expert would have to instruct readers when words, like "quicken" in "The Cold Heaven," which are so pregnant with meaning and so thick in context, mark moments in the poem that call for an "unsnarling" (256–57). Readers ought to be alerted when a phrase, like "as the books say," impels them to ask, "[W]hich books?," at which point the anthologist fills in the answer, "[E]soteric and Irish folklore ones Yeats delighted in." This kind of basic making sense need not lead to one-sidedness, Miller assured his audience. After all, Yeats first collected "The Cold Heaven" in a volume bearing an epigraph by Confucius, a fact about which Chinese readers "might have a lot to say" (257). And on this note, the American visitor ventriloquizing a Chinese anthologist received a standing ovation.

Two questions: What is new about this method? And how is it respectful?

In heated debates about reading since the 1990s, prescriptive interventions, dubbed methodological and staged as a vital response to the new institutional realities wrought by globalization, have proliferated. Miller's proposal is no exception: a method proffered to bridge the gap between an old way of thinking and a new reality. But Miller's method doesn't seem to differ much from the contextualism of E. D. Hirsch and Quentin Skinner in the 1960s and 1970s, with its ethical injunction to respect the radical specificity of historical objects. Indeed, for Miller to present this method of making basic sense as new, he proceeds as if Hans-Georg Gadamer never posited the openness of horizons and inevitability of prejudice, as if Roland Barthes never spoke of the "writerly" experience of the literary text (4), as if postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha never excavated the ambiguous symbiosis of prejudice and desire, and as if intellectual historians like Hayden White had not elaborated a thorough formalist critique of contextualist explanation.

How does this mode of guided or supervised reading help the critic to ensure, in Miller's phrase, that readings "*respect* the many different conceptions of 'literature' in different times and places throughout the world" (255; emphasis added)? Miller's imagined Chinese anthology reminds me, as a postcolonial, of the textbooks from which I studied English literature as a young girl in Lebanon. In them, if memory serves, a poem like Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West" would come with a list of things to know and a sanctioned interpretation to be memorized and reproduced on official examinations. Miller's proposed anthology also recalls the textbooks of Arabic literature in which a seventh-century Arabic poem came armored with a foolproof battery of contextual machinery including historical background, an author's biography, a comprehensive glossary, and a thorough explication of classical rhetorical devices—precluding the possibility of merging horizons, the prospect of a writerly reading, or the pleasure of setting the textbook's apparent prejudices against one's own.

Sitting with my team of American comparatists at Miller's lecture, I wondered, "What just happened?" Evidently, a well-intentioned critic deemed it proper to seek a reading method oriented to the goal of respecting (and not unearthing, as for Damrosch) the specificity of literary objects and values. To this end, he had devised a mode of reading that preempts readers' impositions on a text with external values, by skipping interpretation altogether. Ironically, the real-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ization of this ideal would result in a program where the Chinese reader, who is to be an engaged reader but a disengaged critic, emerges from this picture as an automaton of reading.

What is most remarkable in all this is that Miller never thinks to ask, What's in it for the Chinese or Arab or Indian or African reader—not to mention the ignorant "computer-games-playing young Western person"? How can he assume that any such reader would accede to a regime of control in the name of propriety, when doing so essentially requires one to abdicate the right to interpretation? Miller's proposal to read without reading instantiates the paradoxes of a rapidly gaining methodological discourse in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, a discourse I call the new objectivity. In what follows, I delineate the new objectivity as an ethical-methodological discourse that posits procedural neutrality (or objectivity) as the optimally ethical mode of engaging the people and objects we study. My task will be to unsnarl the premises on which ethically charged methodological injunctions, recently made on behalf of literature itself, necessitate a bracketing of motive.[2]

But first there is a sequel to the Shanghai episode. It seems that upon his return to Virginia, Miller recognized his misstep and gracefully reneged on his original call to have lay readers read through an expert to ensure that they read respectfully. A lengthy coda appended to the lecture's printed version performs a second thought experiment, where Miller embarks on an inquiry into the meaning of the word "dissonance" in Friedrich Nietzsche's pessimistic reflections on *Weltliteratur*. This new inquiry is propelled by the implicit question, Just how far must Miller, the critic—now a reader, no longer an expert—traverse the "substratum beneath" *The Birth of Tragedy* before his quest comes to a conclusion (254)? The coda takes shape as Miller moves from *The Birth of Tragedy* to the Nietzschean corpus more broadly, to the vast body of Nietzschean criticism, eventually finding himself drowning in context. His journey culminates in a moment when he is forced to intervene—that is, to impose on the (con)text—by bringing the process of contextualization to a halt. "I refrain," he announces, "from pursuing this rabbit any further down its rabbit hole," conceding that "an innocent looking word, 'dissonance' in this case, like 'quicken' in Yeats's 'The Cold Heaven,' can lead to a virtually interminable reading that ultimately includes everything the author wrote and its dissonant and therefore untotalizable intellectual, cultural and linguistic context" (261). This time, the lesson is that one cannot read without getting lost in the rabbit hole, except by *doing* a reading. There is no way to read respectfully, if respect means staying out of the text. He can see (or has been reminded) that contexts will always need to be given form, as much as forms need to be related to contexts. As such, *world literature* can no longer name a methodological challenge, presumably new, of how a traveling poem could be held in place. Miller's reading of Nietzsche, inspired by a reflection on a Chinese reading of Yeats, has forced Miller to rediscover the absence of grounds, a discomforting realization that must be confronted anew, in world literature.

Here, Miller comes upon a question that, to my mind, has been largely ignored in current debates about reading. In a reading situation where something like a substratum cannot be relied on to ground the text or our reading of it, what might still drive us to read (or do) world literature? His answer is that globalization is irreversible. Reading literature can no longer afford us the comfort that Nietzsche coveted, like Athenians nestled in a local culture. Nonetheless, says Miller, world literature as a reading situation, can "help us to understand and to live productively in the new uncomfortable world." What do we want? Productivity. Why do we want it? To be productive. We cannot afford Nietzsche's

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"unproductive nostalgia," in other words, so productivity must double up as goal and motive (264).

The challenges Miller presents as developments of globalization are of course not new. The problems of contextualism and cultural relativism go back to the so-called crisis of historicism in the late nineteenth century. What is new, I argue, are the epistemological conditions, or lack thereof, framing the problem of reading—conditions which, as I have shown in Miller's accidental foray into the world-literature debate, underscore an aporia of motive.

Neutrality as Motive?

If we search the methodological recommendations of new objectivists for a motive for reading, we find instead a triad of motifs: abstention from imposition, commitment to respect, and the embrace of objectivity as a mode of comportment toward things in the world, including people. A stark example of this combination can be found in recent work that advocates various modes of not-close reading. Rita Felski declares critical imposition a problem paramount for literary studies and extends one of many recent invitations to import Bruno Latour's actor-network theory into literary studies as an answer to the question, "How could [we] remain skeptical and vigilant without seeking to impose a new regime of authoritarian knowledge?" ("Digging" 15). Heather Love also looks to Latour for methodological reform, suggesting that literary critics heed his call to social scientists to follow the methodological standards of natural scientists. Love argues that by embracing this turn in social science toward natural science, literary critics could emulate scientific standards of objectivity by way of which researchers "'do not muffle their informants' precise vocabulary into their own all-purpose meta-language' but are forced instead 'to take into account at least some of the many quirks of their recalcitrant objects.'" In the study of literature, such an adjustment would mean a movement away from interpretation and contextualization, and toward description, which Love takes as a method showing "respect for the people one studies [which] is not framed in traditional humanist terms" (376). Similarly, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best associate the humanist tradition of critique with a vacuous heroic posture that gives the critic license to plumb the text's depths, reading into, under, or over the text itself (5). They propose "surface reading" as a countermeasure to critical interpretation, a type of "relatively neutral" reading (16) that can temper the critical predisposition for "judging" (18). In their account, the digital humanist's commitment to abstain from critical interpretation becomes emblematic of a modesty that consents to, nay prefers, "using machines to bypass" the subjectivity of critical judgment (17). In short, this methodological discourse commands us to be modest, to be proper, to use respect, and to practice self-discipline, or else risk getting caught in the moral complexities of ethical judgment.

But there is no evident epistemological framework to ground these methodological injunctions, nor to justify the ethical charge attached to them. The lack of such a framework has led many critics to dismiss the intervention thus staged as an empty or mere space-clearing gesture (Rooney; Stockton; Halberstam). Given my purpose to delineate the new objectivity as a salient albeit dispersed ethical-methodological discourse, I am interested nonetheless in what could be learned from this "mini-movement" as an instantiation of a broader phenomenon (Halberstam). To grasp the logic that triangulates imposition as a concern, respect as an ethical injunction, and objectivity as a methodological stance, I am willing to seek the absent framework by taking a detour through the work of Latour, under whose name claims against interpretive reading are made.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Respect, Restraint, Objectivity

Literary critics who have imported Latour into literary studies, most notably Felski, have wagered on the applicability of his methodological interventions in the social sciences to literary studies. These interventions include not only the aim of replacing society with the social as the object of social science inquiry but also, crucially, the conception of what he calls "relative scale":

> The problem is that social scientists use scale as one of the many variables they need to set up *before* doing the study, whereas scale is what actors achieve by scaling, spacing, and contextualizing each other through the transportation in some specific vehicles of some specific traces. It is of little use to respect the actors' achievements if in the end we deny them one of their most important privileges, namely that they are the ones defining relative scale. It's not the analyst's job to impose an absolute one. (183–84)

I turn to this passage because it sets forth the methodological problem confronted by actor-network theory in terms that elaborate the relation of respect, restraint, and objectivity, which thus allows us to parse what in Latour's ontology has been transferred into platforms against close reading, interpretation, and "critique" more broadly. This exposition on "relative scale" clarifies that when Felski calls for a method characterized by a "critical ethos of attentiveness, respect, and generosity" ("Latour" 740), she is echoing Latour's call to "respect the actors' achievements." Her insistence that respect toward literary objects be expressed in the form of restraint, "taking care not to conjure textual meanings out of preexisting assumptions or explanations," reiterates Latour's stated commitment to preempt the analyst's propensity for imposition. Likewise, speaking of "honoring and detailing the singular features of a text [and] the specific routes along which [literature] travels" as a methodological aim becomes less mysterious once we are aware of the resonance it cultivates with the Latourian conception of specificity in his critique of scale (740). In actor-network analysis, methodological objectivity signifies a mode of distance between the analyst and the object of analysis, a distance that must be maintained so that the analyst does not impose on the object with predetermined scales. Specificity is thus the difference between "relative scale" (which is in the object) and "predetermined scales" (which are imposed by the subject). The specific (in "specific vehicles of some specific traces") thus names a quality of the object that precedes and cannot survive anterior or external impositions of scale. In sum, when Felski calls for abstention from imposition by the critic—which includes imposition of concepts (theoretical frameworks), history (contextual analysis), or interpretation (subjective reading)—she is basing her call on the promise in Latour's account that this mode of comportment toward the literary object will provide access to specificity ("the specific routes along which [literature] travels").

We are now in a position to ask, Precisely what in the transfer of Latour's critique of scale to literature necessitates the suspension of motive? Rephrasing the question posed earlier to Miller, we would ask, What is it about specificity that makes it worth giving up the challenges, pleasures, and adventures of interpretation? Felski's answer is that interpretation obscures the specificity of literary objects' intrinsic scale, whereas tracing the specific routes of literary networks would restore to us the experience of literature's ability to "entice and enlist us, surprise and seduce us" (739). As to why surprise and seduction ought to be restored in the experience of literature, and how it is restored in what is specific about literary objects, we must again look elsewhere. In Latour's summation, actor-network theory's political project "is nothing more than a complicated way to go back to the surprise at seeing the social unravel" (258). In fact, when Latour invites social scientists to

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become practitioners of actor-network theory, he promises the experience of surprise as the reward of abstention from imposition. In an object whose "ontological dignity" remains intact, specificity can be expected to register for the analyst in the experience of surprise. In surprise, the analyst not only gets to encounter "beautiful, complex" conduits, sites, even aliens but also gets to see them "pop up" (190).

This brief detour through Latour shows how respect, restraint, and objectivity come together in a story, or ontological account, that makes surprise the central element of a structure of insight.[3] It suggests that a commitment to Latour's radical empiricism by literary scholars entails a radical commitment to epistemological conditions in which surprise, as a structure of insight, hinges on the extent to which the critic manages to let the concepts and categories, as operative scales, emerge from the encounter with the literary text without imposition. We can now recognize the substitution, in theoretical adaptations of actor-network theory by literary critics, of surprise as a structure of insight for the mechanism of critical revelation. We may be able to note how, in practical applications of actor-network theory to literature, the figure of surprise, as an affective jolt to be delivered under the conditions of neutrality, plays an indispensable role in flat accounts of literary and aesthetic phenomena.[4]

This is just a sample of the appeal of flat ontologies at this moment of crisis for literary studies. The notion that some form of methodological objectivity shall reward us by restoring surprise to our experience of the world is, in fact, ubiquitous. Fredric Bogel, in a manifesto advocating a "new formalism," proposes that "close reading" is a method that "mounts a salutary resistance to the surmises and projections of the interpreter" and as such can be revived as a way of "taking responsibility for the being and interpretation of the full text." In a debate about the optimal scale of reading, an advocate of close reading such as Bogel would be expected to fall on the opposite side from advocates of distant reading. But, like advocates of a Latourian flat ontology, he describes new formalist reading as a mode of affective comportment that requires the reader to remain "patient" and "attentive" when confronting the text. As to why the reader should agree with or commit to this affective profile, Bogel says it is a way of "allowing ourselves to be *surprised* both by what it is and by the ways it differs from what we had thought it was" (34). Doris Sommer similarly argues that if we do not impose our generic expectations in reading Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio*, we will "register surprise" (127). Likewise, if we manage not to "expect candor and self-exposure" when reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, we will "feel surprise at pieces of language that don't fit our world picture" (171). Repeatedly, surprise is promised as the reward of a regime of control, a commitment by readers to modulate their forms of engagement with people and things in the world.[5]

Before I return, finally, to the question of motive, I stress that the ethical-methodological discourse I have identified as the new objectivity is neither a dimension of literary Latourianism in particular nor a conundrum unique to defenses of world literature. More important, this discourse is not coeval with the family of critical trajectories often grouped under the broad rubric of distant reading. My inquiry into Latour concerns less the validity of his methodological claims than an attempt to grasp the appeal of the epistemological conditions that are invoked by actor-network theory's flat ontology. If anything, my purpose is to show that a critic need not turn to Latour or adopt the apparatus of actor-network theory to unfold a program that opposes the modes of judgment associated with interpretation, critique, or humanism. The figure of the ignorant "computer-games-playing young Western person" was sufficient for Miller to find himself implicated in a project in which flattened subjects are to dutifully

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read without reading. The new objectivity is discernible where readers are asked to bring their reading practices and literary experiences—and their mode of comportment toward literary objects—into alignment with a purported ontology of things themselves, with little or no account of motive.

When a literary critic demands that we move past critical interpretation because criticism "no longer surprises us" or because a less active form of interpretation is more likely to remind us of how literature has the ability to "surprise or startle us," the question of motive arises (Felski, *Limits* 9, 84). Or, as I have suggested, it ought to arise. But instead it is mooted: What do we want? Surprise. Why do we want it? Because we want to be surprised.

On the Paranoia about Bad News

Among accounts of reading that foreground surprise, Eve Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" is frequently glossed, especially by disavowers of critique and critical reading, as an essay that warns against the danger of critique's paranoid reading practices and calls for replacing critical reading practices with noncritical, reparative ones. But Sedgwick's seminal essay performs a slide from "paranoid *practices*" to "reparative *motives*," which makes it a notable exception to the suspension of motive in recent debates about reading (9, 22). Lingering on this slide, we see how Sedgwick's preoccupation with the motives for reading attenuates her valorization of surprise as recompense for a willed trust in appearances. The essay's struggle to project a new figure of reading, amid competing diagnostic and prescriptive aims will allow us to draw out the implications of the current aporia of motive.

Sedgwick's galvanization of surprise in her interrogation of critique claims a lineage in the psychology of affects, in particular the cognitive psychologist Silvan Tomkins's affect theory. Sedgwick argues that critical reading practices have all the disadvantages that Tomkins ascribes to a paranoid person's survival strategy. A paranoid man, after being hit by a car, will decide to preempt another accident by avoiding traffic. Taken seriously, a preemptive strategy requires the man to be prepared for the worst at all times. Tomkins says such a strategy relies on a "strong affect theory," which is displayed in its tendency to optimize efficacy by way of broad generalization. The paranoid man generalizes his avoidance strategy by expanding the category of what might be deemed harmful to avoiding all traffic at all times (460). The problem with paranoia that can also be found in the strategies of critique, says Sedgwick, is that generalization is performed even when it is impossible to know whether or to what extent expanding the strategy is optimizing results. There is no way to know how much safer the man has actually become by staying home. The preemptive structure of paranoid practice has the "mushrooming, self-confirming strength of a monopolistic strategy" (15). In the man's paranoid logic, there is good reason to implement, and even expand, his use of the strategy, irrespective of whether it could be shown to be working. If he is not hurt, he will think that expanding use of the strategy could only make him safer. If he is hurt, he will regret not having expanded the avoidance strategy further. For the critic, as for the paranoid person, one cannot be paranoid enough. Critical readers, says Sedgwick, have similarly become too cautious to attach themselves to literary objects, for critique's paranoid tendency inclines it to distrust appearances and search for hidden meanings. Like the paranoid, critics live by preemptive strategies that anticipate pain, shame, or disappointment. Critical reading, according to Sedgwick, carries the same danger that Tomkins recognizes in the strategy of the paranoid—namely, that "anticipating negative affect can have the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect" (15). To

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feel safer dreading the unknown rather than trusting the evident, to suspect the worst rather than to take things at face value, are compulsions that make sense to the paranoid person and the critical reader, says Sedgwick, only as part of a strategy aimed at preempting the possibility of bad surprises.

The first, diagnostic, step in Sedgwick's argument is that critique exhibits an "aversion to surprise" that works as a self-defeating survival strategy (9). The second, prescriptive, step reflects on how the individual could break the self-confirming cycle of paranoia, in particular, its "self-defeating strategies for *forestalling pain*" (15). To find a picture of what a reading strategy that is not paranoid might look like, Sedgwick turns from Tomkins to Melanie Klein. From Klein, Sedgwick gets an account of a possible shift from the paranoid to the depressive position, which in the essay occasions a transition from "paranoid practices" to "reparative motives." The turn to Klein allows for the possibility of an individual "achievement" in the form of "a concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived not particularly to offer them" (16). But not without some finessing: Sedgwick acknowledges that, in most accounts, Klein's depressive position opens up an ethical possibility "in the form of a guilty, empathetic view of the other," but she insists that such an orientation toward the other is "founded on and coextensive with" the newly achieved capacity for self-interested care (15).

Surprise thus comes to mark the difference between paranoid and reparative reading practices: "to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious, paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*: to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones" (24). The argument's twofold structure—interrogating critique as a paranoid reading practice and then tethering surprise to reparative reading as its countermeasure—has allowed Sedgwick's treatment of reparative reading to be melded to postcritical agendas as disparate as literary adaptations of actor-network theory and postsecularist recantations of liberal humanism. However, agendas that have subsumed Sedgwick's under their own, by attributing to Sedgwick a conception of paranoid and reparative reading practices as, respectively, vehicles of bad and good news, would be rickety at best. For in saying, "to a reparatively positioned reader . . . [b]ecause there can be terrible surprises, . . . there can also be good ones," Sedgwick is certainly warning us that when we avoid surprise for fear of bad news, we risk missing out on good surprises. But the same assertion entails a further suggestion; namely, there is no way of avoiding bad news that does not avoid all news, good and bad, and unless we want to get no news at all, we have to be fine with getting bad news and make peace with the possibility of surprise. This is to say, in the final tally of good and bad news, which is admittedly unpredictable, surprise is good, because news always comes in the form of surprise—or as she puts it, surprises always "come to the reader *as new*." In short, Sedgwick's commitment, as I understand it, is not to reparation, of which surprise is a symptom, but to surprise as a structure that would enable reparation. She presents reparative reading as an alternative to, and not a replacement for, paranoid reading. More important, her description of critical reading as a paranoid "theory of affect" (in Tomkins's sense) conceives the danger of paranoid reading, first and foremost, as a threat to the individual's renewal—the individual's continued vitality.

"Why Bother?"

Democratic criticism has traditionally entwined questions of method and motive to

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make literature an occasion for reflecting on the optimal conditions of vitality. As such, Sedgwick's critique of critique, including its wager on surprise, is prefigured by the iconic debates of the 1970s, in which Hillis Miller debated M. H. Abrams and Wayne Booth, in a series of essays on "The Limits of Pluralism," on how a poem ought to be read. It recalls Booth's assertion that for criticism to conduce to a healthy pluralism, a critic's reading must not "offer to vitalize only himself [but the reader] as well." He must "invite us all to a community of inquiry" instead of "simply exhibiting his own new freedom, shouting down at us, 'Look, fellows, no hands'"? (419). Like Sedgwick, Booth seems attuned to the dangers of critical prescriptions that "proscribe" rather than "invite." A good reading provides "a renewed vigor, a new promise that the enterprise [of criticism] will not stagnate" by harmonizing individual and collective interests (411). Booth faults Miller's deconstructive mode of reading for favoring the "spiritual liberation" of the individual reader to an extent that compromises criticism's goal of communal inconclusiveness through rational debate (416). When a critic perceives deconstruction as a threat to history, says Booth, that historicist critic is experiencing it as stifling: "Stop, you're killing me!" (418). Sedgwick's intervention echoes the terms of this earlier debate. The analogy she draws between paranoia and critique stresses the dangerous tendency, in the paranoid man and the critical reader, to begin narrowing the sphere of life. Paranoia, as a theory of affect, is killing the paranoid man. Whether or not his strategy keeps him alive, it has destroyed his vitality. Her quarrel with critical prescriptions, like Fredric Jameson's "Always historicize," is the way historical contextualism is framed as an "injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities" (Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading" 5). Put in Booth's idiom, critical reading is dangerous when its "mandatory framing" endangers plurality through exclusion.

Abrams too objects to deconstruction on the grounds that its account of reading can lead to critical monism. Like Sedgwick, he is suspicious of modes of reading that breed repetitiveness, and as with Sedgwick, repetition for him raises the question of motive. He notes that deconstructive reading always "begins as a goal-oriented quest," then moves toward an impasse or "uncanny moment"—and each time, the reader discovers that "all interpretation is misinterpretation," and "all criticism (like all history) of texts can engage only with the critic's own misconstruction." If so, asks Abrams, "then *why bother* to carry on the activities of interpretation and criticism?" (434, emphasis added) In other words, deconstructionist reading endangers vitality not only by excluding alternative ways of reading but also by leaving the reader no plausible motive to read. Similarly, Sedgwick sees the threat of critical monism in the "infinitely doable and teachable" procedures of critical reading ("Paranoid Reading" 21).

That said, tracing the continuity in debates about reading, then and now, underlines an important difference. In the 1970s debates, the validity of critical reading hinged on its function as an apprenticeship in living, such that we-thrive-each-and-all-together (as opposed to, say, so-we-may-live-and-let-live). In this view of criticism, reading is to function as the testing ground for compromise solutions created by readers to negotiate between individual, communal, and other motives. Here, the horizon of reading is one of always reading together. It is like Bernie Sanders's promise to a woman from Flint, Michigan, at a 2016 Democratic presidential primary debate: "I want you to worry about my grandchildren, and I promise you I will worry about your family. We are in this together" (*CNN Democratic Presidential Debate*). Put differently, the debate under the banner of the "Limits of Pluralism" adjudicated the question of motive against a horizon of accountability. Sedgwick's intervention departs from this

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

horizon in that, unlike Booth and Abrams, who perceive the threat of critical monism in a reading that is not vitalizing to the self and others, Sedgwick locates the threat of critical (or paranoid) reading practices in a failure to turn away from others toward the self.

Arguably, in the diagnostic part of her argument, Sedgwick theorizes the reader's position and the role of surprise by drawing on Tomkins's view that the individual often has to negotiate between different "theories of affect" with potentially conflicting goals. These goals include strategies that "seek to minimize pain" (dominant in the paranoid person) and those that "seek to maximize pleasure" (as with reparative motives), among others (Tomkins 180). However, the prescriptive part of her argument, which builds on Klein's account of a transition from the paranoid position into the reparative position, makes critical reading a tendency in which the goal of "seeking to minimize pain" mushrooms into dominance, inevitably. In this second part, critical reading seems to exercise an inherent imperative force, even when it isn't imperatively framed. Many have generalized this sense of critique as always already exclusionary to the whole essay, reading the argument as an invitation to disavow critique and replace it with reparative practices. One detriment of such a reading, which glosses the slide from practices to motives, is that the invitation to always practice reparative reading, ascribed to Sedgwick, imposes a monism of reparative values—or worse, betrays paranoia about critical reading practices.

What is fascinating about the apparent shift in the ethical horizon of criticism—from "What do I owe my fellow critic?" (Booth) to "What do I owe myself as a reader?" (Sedgwick)—is the persistent revaluation of surprise in debating the epistemological conditions that make reading life-nurturing. For Abrams, not to mention Latour and sometimes Sedgwick, the experience of surprise is taken to evidence an encounter with the real. Despite Abrams's reservations about deconstruction, he finds Miller to be "in fact, fortunately for us, a double agent." The proof is that Miller's fellow critics can always expect to "be *surprised* and delighted by *particularities* of what he says" (437; emphasis added). Sedgwick is likewise compelled in "The Weather in Proust" to load surprise with ethical and epistemological weight, unearthing in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* a conception of surprise as "a mark of reality, insofar as what is real . . . has to exceed the will of the subject, including its will to arrive at truths" (34).[6] You have seen reality "pop up," as Latour would say, when surprise as an affective jolt registers a bump against the real. This valuation of surprise cannot be found in Tomkins who, in contrast, regarded surprises as neither good nor bad, stressing that surprise has no content.[7] Famously, he remarked that surprise, unlike any other affect, functions as a mechanism of refreshment that is necessary for individuals to be able to reorient their attention (Nathanson xv). This "important 'clearing' function" performed in big or ill-spaced doses, he noted, "is not without some secondary disadvantages for further orientation" (Tomkins 277). In fact, in Tomkins's conception of surprise, its necessary but double-edged clearing function gives it an uncanny resemblance to critique: "it is the perpetually unwelcome competitor to any ongoing central assembly; it does not favor anything and it is against peaceful coexistence with any visitor to consciousness who has outstayed his welcome" (274). Indeed, the motivating question of Tomkins's psychology of affects recalls the original motive for conceiving "an aesthetic education of man," namely, the question of how much and what form of surprise is optimal for a healthy life.

This inquiry began with my own surprise at the notion of neutrality as motive. To make sense of it, I started by following Miller in his journey into and out of the rabbit hole, then

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

traced the logic of respect in postcritical attacks on reading back to surprise in the flat ontology of Latour, and finally tracked Sedgwick's slide from paranoid practices to reparative motives in the light of her prescription "that our work grows more interesting, more responsive, more truthful, and more useful as we try to *account for its motives* . . ." ("Paranoid Reading" 23). And yet, in the end I find myself nowhere. I am not faced with an abyss of language. I am not caught between a rock and a hard place. Nor am I stranded on an interminable journey. Thus I find myself forced to conclude by returning the question of reading to fundamentals: What do we want? Why do we want it?

Notes

I thank Hayder Al-Mohammad, Aida Levy-Hussen, Franco Moretti, Bruce Robbins, and Hayden White, for commenting on this paper at various stages, and audiences at the departments of English and comparative literature at Johns Hopkins University, Northwestern University, Princeton University, the University of Chicago, the University of South Carolina, the University of Utah, the University of Washington, Columbia University, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, for engaging different articulations of its core argument.

1. Miller's lecture, "Globalization and World Literature," appeared with the same title in *Neohelicon*, subsequently reprinted as a chapter of his recent book *Literature Matters* (2016).

2. In this discourse, *neutrality* and *objectivity* are often deployed interchangeably.

3. On the merit and function of surprise, see Felski, *Uses* 9, 84, 94, 114, 116, 125, 150, 167, 190.

4. To grasp the constitutive function of surprise as a trope in applications of the program proposed by Felski, note its recurrence in Levine 12, 20–23, 28, 68, 77, 85, 89, 119.

5. In the debate on comparison, too, productivity is a salient category. R. Radhakrishnan and Walter Mignolo accuse comparativism of upholding the fallacy of neutrality, while Susan Friedman and Marcel Detienne see its productivity in forcing us to repeatedly face the limits of neutrality.

6. Another side of surprise's "double-function," according to Sedgwick, is "its promise of an ever-refreshed internal world," which marks, in addition to reality, Proust's "mystical orientation": "the ultimate guarantee of the vitality of art is its ability to surprise—that is, to manifest an agency distinct from either its creator or its consumer. A consummated fantasy of omnipotence would be the precise opposite of such ability to surprise and be surprised" (33–34).

7. "Whatever its quality, positive or negative, [surprise] is frequently confused with the affect which immediately follows it" (273).

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