

Close reading, queer feelings

“I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me.”

– Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*¹

What’s queer about close reading? Given the method’s rather staid institutional history—from the turrets of Cambridge, to the lecture halls of Yale—we might be forgiven for thinking of formalism as a textual approach which has little to teach us about queerness. Given, too, that close reading is often heralded as the closest thing Literary Studies possesses to a scientific method, it seems fair to presume, at first touch, that its attunement to questions of identity, intimacy and feeling might be somewhat limited. Indeed, any student who, flicking through *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), lands on the famous twin essays by New Critics W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley—“The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) and “The Affective Fallacy” (1949)—will no doubt find some rather dogmatic backing any such hunch.² In these, “two of the most important position papers in the history of twentieth-century criticism,” the authors make a case for expunging all subjective judgement from the scene of critical reading (to judge a text using emotive, evaluative language is to commit the ‘Affective Fallacy’), and urge readers, too, to excise from their analysis any speculation as to *what the author really meant* (to do so would be to fall prey to the ‘Intentional Fallacy’).³ These two essays routinely make it on to undergraduate reading lists, and though most teachers encourage students to take Wimsatt and Beardsley’s mandates with a pinch of salt, their fundamental insights are still recommended as good rules of thumb when doing that thing we call ‘criticism.’

Even though the New Criticism is long behind us, its legacy informs Literary Studies still. Good close readers, it warns us, don’t do feeling. Good close readers, it insists, do not seek to *get close* to the figure of the author.

As an undergraduate, I felt a tug of resistance when faced with the strict protocols guarding what, according to the New Critics, constituted a successful—or, to borrow a term coined by linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin, a ‘felicitous’—reading. (‘Felicitous’: a curiously enchanted word, for a process so apparently evacuated of affect.) For me, close reading has always been, at its best, an *experience*: one of ‘getting close’ to a work—close enough to feel the contours of structure, the texture of syntax. Of measuring each line in the mouth. Of feeling a curious intimacy with the text, at once cerebral and embodied; of taking of certain passages to heart, for consolation and safe keeping. Of harbouring a deep and at times unshakable *care* for the words on the page. Years later, when I came across Angus Brown’s marvellous formulation, of close reading as a “secret choreography between book and body,” I felt I knew exactly, intuitively, what he meant.⁴

From T. S. Eliot’s injunction, in the early 1920s, that criticism ought to be a wholly impersonal affair,⁵ through to deconstruction’s unravelling of the notion of ‘identity’ as a stable and coherent entity, there has been little space, in twentieth-century literary criticism, for a feeling subject—let alone a queer one. Or one with queer feelings. Or one who senses a current of queerness stirring in the text at hand. And yet, if Elizabeth Freeman is right, and queer subjects are close reading one another, and dominant culture,

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 38.

² *The Norton Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al (London: Norton, 2010).

³ Vincent B. Leitch et al, ‘William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley’, *The Norton Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, pp. 1230-1232, p. 1230.

⁴ Angus Brown, ‘The Touch of Reading in Alan Hollinghurst’s Early Prose’, *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing under the Influence*, ed. Denis Flannery and Michele Mendelssohn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 25-39, p. 26.

⁵ For more on this, see T. S. Eliot’s *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920), especially his oft-cited essay of 1919, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’.

all the time, then there must be a way for this embodied, intersubjective, and culturally-attuned mode of close reading to be transferred back to the books we read in the privacy of the bedroom, and in the proscenium of academic criticism.⁶ If one of the affordances of queerness is its capacity to be “multiply transitive,” to move “across” an “infinite mesh of possibilities,” then there must be a way of beckoning the queerness of close reading across the folds of these domains, from the social and the relational, to the textual.⁷ The question, in my head, keeps emerging as an ethical one: how do we close read with care? Or, put another way: how might we treat a text like a person? And how might the text treat *us*, the reader, like one in return?

I'm an avid reader of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. I love her for the twinned intricacy and lucidity of her critical style (a sumptuous paradox, as a reader, to dwell in); I love her for her unabashed use of the first-person (well, sometimes bashful—but joyfully self-aware in being so!); and I love her, perhaps above all, for her passionate commitment to close reading, a passion which often expands, or renders porous, the borders of the first-person, and which merges into a kind of compassion: a feeling *with*, and not just *for*, the text at hand. If we read closely enough, her criticism seems to say, we might not only feel something *for* the novel, or poem, or paragraph, or line—but we might also discover that it has something to teach us *about* feeling, in kind. Sedgwick puts this wonderfully:

For me, [a] strong formalist investment didn't imply (as formalism is generally taken to imply) an evacuation of interest from the passionate, the imagistic, the ethical dimensions of texts, but quite the contrary: the need I brought to books and poems was hardly to be circumscribed, and I felt I knew I would have to struggle to wrest from them sustaining news of the world, ideas, myself, and (in various senses) my kind.⁸

When we read, we may well come to the texts with “needs” we can't yet name; and it may only be through tending closely and carefully (diligently, yes, but also with the capacity to be *filled* with *care*) that we are able to gain from them “sustaining news”—of the world and how we might place ourselves within it; of who we are, or could be, in relation to others, including the “other” of the text itself. In this way, for Sedgwick, close reading becomes a kind of “ardent reading,” which holds the potential to “function in relation to queer experience.”⁹

Given that close reading implies, at its heart, an attention paid (or, put less economically: offered, given, even gifted) to specific textual moments, it would be remiss of me not to dwell on a few examples of “ardent reading” here, and contemplate what it stands to offer a reader—queer, or otherwise. One which I love, for its strangeness and its specificity, for its tenderness and openness to embarrassment, comes from Sedgwick herself, in her autocritical essay, ‘A Poem is Being Written’ (1987). (By autocritical, I simply mean: in this essay, Sedgwick turns her critical attention to several poems she composed as a young child.) Early on in this essay, she muses on what has long been, for her, one of the potencies of the lyric form: “... known to the child by its beat and by a principle of severe economy ... the lyric poem was both the spanked body, my own body or another one like it for me to watch or punish, and at the same time the very spanking, the rhythmic hand whether hard or subtle of authority itself.”¹⁰ Here, close reading is (at least) doubly underway: on the level of form, as Sedgwick unpacks the strange forces and associations of the lyric poem, as well as on the level of person, as Sedgwick closely attends to the effects and affects of this form upon on her younger self. “What child wouldn't be ravenous for dominion in this

⁶ In her book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), Elizabeth Freeman seeks to honour the legacy “of queers as close enough readers of one another and of dominant culture to gather up, literally, life's outtakes and waste products and turn them into fictitious but beautiful (w)holes. Because in taking care of our own we have also been *forced to stay close*, to wash one another's sweat-soaked sheets in Fab when no one else would. I am hard pressed to give up on sex and sociability, especially sociability and even erotics with the dead, as ways of knowing and making.” (pp. xxi-xxii, emphasis mine.)

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. xii; p. 8.

⁸ Sedgwick, ‘Queer and Now’, *Tendencies*, pp. 1-23, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Sedgwick, ‘A Poem is Being Written’, *Tendencies*, pp. 177-215, p. 184.

place?” Sedgwick asks of the lyric’s small and navigable world. “Among the powers to be won was the power to brazen, to conceal, to savage, to adorn, or to abstract the body of one’s own humiliation; or perhaps most wonderful, to *identify with* it, creating with painful love and care, but in a temporality miraculously compressed by the elegancies of language”.¹¹ From a young age, close reading offered the young Eve a means of feeling her way to, and through, questions of eroticism and discipline, of rhythm and form, of humiliation and enchantment. As an adult—and a literary critic, no less—her skills of close textual analysis may be more ‘disciplined’ in a scholastic sense, but they nevertheless allow her to tend closely, carefully, and compassionately, to the formal and affective forces which mystified and compelled her younger self—to give them a shape, and a name.

One thing I like so much about this essay is the way that it showcases close reading’s capacity to tolerate ambivalence. For much of the twentieth century, close reading was turned to as a kind of cure: in the late 1920s, for Cambridge ‘Practical Critic’ I. A. Richards, close reading held the promise not only of making his students into better readers, but potentially even better *people*, too, by helping them to unpick what he describes as the “tricksy components of [their] lives.”¹² And for the New Critics, a decade or so later, close reading was implicitly promoted as a quasi-scientific methodology, which helped afford Literary Studies—still a relatively young subject in the US academy—greater institutional parity with the better-funded and more prestigious ‘hard sciences.’ And given the nature of Sedgwick’s inquiry in ‘A Poem is Being Written’, it would have been easy for her to take an uncomplicatedly psychoanalytic line: that, through its deep and searching attention to the young Eve’s psychic state, close reading might help to cure any perversions or pathologies stemming from, or manifest in, her early creative life. Instead, what close reading affords her is a mode of relationality: it enables her to “identif[y] with” her younger self, with “painful love and care”—a self “miraculously compressed,” in memory, “by the elegancies of language.” Close reading allows her to read her younger self with a care for, and an acceptance of, her contradictions and hostilities, her pleasures and humiliations, without trying to cure them, without trying to read them into an acceptable, normative shape. It allows her to read her younger self like a lyric poem: to understand, rather than to solve.

One more example, from perhaps my favourite “ardent reader” of all: Marcos Gonzalez, whose 2019 essay, ‘My Decade of Falling in Love with the Writing of José Esteban Muñoz’ shows that queer theory itself can be a rich and dazzling site for close reading, where all manner of sensations and revelations might take centre-stage.¹³ Recalling the “electric feeling coursing through [his] body, the fully embodied ah-ha moment [he] experienced when [he] first read” Muñoz’s first book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (1999), Gonzalez reflects on what, exactly, it was that so “move[d]” him, in this first “encounter” with Muñoz. “It’s not that the passage is anecdotal which makes it memorable,” he tells us; rather, it’s “the flare of it. The flaming staccato of the opening sentence which asks us to note it, to luxuriate over it, to notice what he is doing. The jerky rhythm of the clauses documenting the body and relations of the scholar, *the affinities and intimacies the scholar is having with the object of analysis ...*”¹⁴ Gonzalez “luxuriates” in what we could, perhaps, call an *erotics* of close reading—or what, to return to Angus Brown, we could describe as “the secret choreography of book and body,” made public. There is a delicious double-voyeurism at play here: through the keyhole of the personal essay, we see Gonzales experiencing “affinities and intimacies” with Muñoz, as Muñoz shares similar, intimate pleasures with his own chosen objects.¹⁵ “Am I cruising after Muñoz’s style?” Gonzalez asks. “To feel his distinction in

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgment* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), p. 45.

¹³ Marcos Gonzales, ‘My Decade of Falling in Love with the Writing of José Esteban Muñoz’ (28 August, 2019), *Lit Hub*, <https://lithub.com/my-decade-of-falling-in-love-with-the-writing-of-jose-esteban-munoz/> [accessed 7 February, 2022].

¹⁴ Gonzales, *ibid.* Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*: “How can we read criticism? Only one way: since I am here a second-degree reader, I must shift my position: instead of agreeing to be the confidant of this critical pleasure—a sure way to miss it—I can make myself its voyeur: I observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion ...” (p. 17).

words, to touch his prose singularity? Do I want to be cruised on by him?” Shattering the dual taboo of the Affective and Intentional Fallacies in one yearning gesture, Gonzalez creates a space for close reading as a mode of textual desire: where close reading can mean “wanting the touch by the style of a thinker I will never know,” and investing in “the hopeful intimacy of style’s reach.”¹⁶ Gonzalez practices a mode of “ardent reading” which is “eager for all kinds of thought and sensory experience,” and which crucially, like Sedgwick, like Brown, sees no need for drawing up a partition between book and body.¹⁷

Going against the grain of close reading’s early, institutional history, these critics—these ardent readers—show us a way to close read *with* feeling, a way of *getting close* to texts, to others, to texts-*as*-others, which may “wound or seduce,” but which neither asks for, nor has need of, a cure.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Gonzales, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Gonzales, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 38.