

Rewriting Close Reading: A Response to Judith Anderson and Theresa M. DiPasquale*

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Donne is an apt, indeed ideal, author for debates about close reading: as Judith Anderson's essay notes, he has been the poster boy for the varied critical approaches included in that category. And 2018, the year the initial essays in this series appeared in *Connotations*, was an apt juncture for reconsidering close reading: both that practice and alternatives determinedly and often explicitly opposed to it, notably distant and surface reading, have interested many critics during the second decade of the twenty-first century. (Indeed, that widespread engagement led me to organize the panel at the 2018 Modern Language Association conference that subsequently generated these essays by Judith Anderson and Theresa DiPasquale.)¹ Finally, *Connotations* is an apt venue for such questions: its longstanding commitment to dialogue among critics can advance our understanding of the debates explicated by Anderson and DiPasquale.

Their essays respond powerfully to the opportunities created by that happy confluence of time, subject matter, and venue. In pursuing ways in which Donne's texts are situated, in the largest sense of that adjective, these contributions form a diptych. Anderson argues that, although the analysis of language is at the core of English studies, it does not—and cannot—preclude engagement with issues about culture. Drawing on personal experience with the Donne monument, DiPasquale relates its words to spatialities and visualities, among

*References: Judith Anderson, "Literature, Culture, and Other Redundancies: Close Reading Donne," *Connotations* 27 (2018): 155-66; Theresa M. DiPasquale, "Ways of Reading Donne's St. Paul's Epitaph: Close, Comparative, Contextu[r]al, Concrete," *Connotations* 27 (2018): 167-89.

<https://www.connotations.de/debate/donnes-anniversaries-matter-and-spirit/>

many other perspectives. Both authors wrestle with such questions through carefully marshalled evidence, indeed in so doing providing models for evidentiary procedures that our students are, or in any event should be, learning. In particular, Anderson examines the significantly different contents of two collections of essays from the 1970s, thus demonstrating the range of approaches to Donne and of established and nascent critical methodologies during that period. In bringing to bear on her principal text not only intense scrutiny of words like “aspicit,” but many other sources of evidence, DiPasquale persuasively connects close reading with textual studies, space studies, and affective criticism, among yet more perspectives. (Like those essays, my own work here focuses primarily on the United States, though with some attention to England as well—and with the hope of encouraging subsequent contributions from other national and international perspectives.)

As oral presentations re-presented in written form but without a total transformation into a more lengthy scholarly article, those two powerful contributions are themselves a mixed genre that invites suggestions for future expansion and development. Although she notes in passing that one editor she discusses is British and the other American, Anderson’s suggestive contribution here could and should do more with the impact of differences between their cultures. Such figures as I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, both of course associated with types of close reading and many other issues raised in the collections Anderson contrasts, affected and indeed effected profound differences between critical practices in their respective worlds. Even in its current form, Theresa DiPasquale’s work fruitfully extends Scott L. Newstok’s groundbreaking analyses of the epitaph. But in writing about a genre often, though again certainly controversially, identified with a universalized “lyric I,” Theresa DiPasquale might have discussed the particular implications of identifying her own religious affiliation and the intriguing broader questions about introducing personal experience into close reading. The often rigid assumption that all well trained readers will interpret texts alike harmed certain

early versions of close reading; yet many teachers in the United States have witnessed the problems resulting from students' celebration of "relatability"—that is, emphasizing putative connections between a text and their own lives. DiPasquale's work also could invite us to compare and contrast epitaphs in the more customary senses with epitaph-like texts in situations where the body cannot be found, notably the tributes outside their fire stations for the victims of 9/11. And both DiPasquale's and Anderson's essays might well encourage subsequent discussions of what constitutes the "literary"—and why that matters.

Above all, however, these two essays crystallize both the risks and the challenges, many related to the authors' emphasis on situatedness, close reading introduces into our criticism and classrooms. Such issues are especially pressing for scholars of Donne's work. First, Anderson and DiPasquale repeatedly draw our attention to the problems of defining the practice or practices in question—challenges that involve tracing the diachronic and synchronic differences to which I will return. In *Situated Utterances: Texts, Bodies, and Cultural Representations*, Harry Berger, Jr. influentially identifies attributes of close reading (30-33), though this inventory is questioned by Anderson and Berger himself. To what extent is it useful, at least heuristically? However one responds to that query, a few attributes skirted or ignored in his listing are surely crucial to understanding the status of close reading both yesterday and today—though if and only if we approach these items with the caveats that immediately succeed this paragraph. In particular, we should remember that many practitioners of close reading in the middle of the twentieth century considered "message" the m-word. It was seen to imply a simplistic, Hallmark-card truth inconsistent with the complexities and ambiguities manifest in, for example, the treatment of Petrarchism in "The Canonization"; and it risked underplaying the tonal nuancing that could shape a would-be message (how should we read the allusions to Christ as a phoenix in that poem?). The alternative, alertness to the complexities that might not be completely resolved, was often exemplified in

critical discussions of Donne's work. But DiPasquale's essay identifies certain spiritual beliefs in the texts she examines that are indeed messages—and messages with complexity denied by New Critical dismissals of the concept.

Diction crystallizes other attributes of close reading not explicitly emphasized on Berger's list but compatible with it. Many close readers would have praised good interpretations as "sensitive" rather than two terms prominent in criticism today, "powerful" or "robust." The comparisons among those adjectives should interest Donne scholars particularly, given that his work lends itself to all of them—and should interest all scholars because they invite differing aims in one's own readings and differing ways of evaluating those of other people. But whatever label was attached to the results, close reading in the middle of the twentieth century often assumed not only a unified text but largely unified reactions to it from appropriately trained and, yes, sensitive readers. (I. A. Richards's reports on misguided readings contrasted the elect from the unwashed.)

Lists like Berger's, supplemented with observations like mine about "message" and "sensitive," can be useful, but both Anderson and Berger rightly point out the many dangers of generalizing about close reading, dangers that repay, indeed demand, debates like those to which *Connotations* is committed. The generation of critics educated in the heyday of mid-century close reading, now nearing or at the ends of their careers, might occasionally find that Oedipal resentments or, alternatively, filial piety risk compromising their current evaluations of close reading; in telling contrast, most academics today were trained when in many quarters close reading was the past from which one turned away, the remnant one loved to hate.

How, then, can one arrive at a more balanced interpretation of the close reading that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s and was widely accepted in some circles for a few decades after that? How can one determine what more recent adoptions or adaptations or rejections of it can best advance Donne studies today? In approaching such questions, I maintain, as Anderson's fine essay does as well, that not

celebrating ripeness but rather anticipating variousness is all, or almost all. In terms of diachrony, in *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Gerald Graff persuasively demonstrates how New Critical close reading practices changed temporally (see esp. 145-61). The label "Old New Criticism," one should add, risks ignoring or underplaying changes within that category. And however it is labelled and described, New Criticism, especially the monolithic version of it too often cited, should not be conflated with other forms of close reading. Although the unified text and resolved paradox were hardly on the shopping lists of the practitioners of deconstruction, many have observed that members of that guild were not only close readers but also among the very best. Generalizations about critical movements need to be situated in shorter historical segments than we sometimes admit: the striking shifts in feminism (for example, the celebration of Shakespeare's so-called strong women by some pioneering feminists in the 1970s differed significantly from reinterpretations of such characters and the move from character to culture later in the movement) should alert us to similar changes in close reading. Moreover, though amassing detailed evidence is outside the scope of this brief response, as I argue elsewhere synchronic variations are arguably as significant as diachronic shifts (Foreword to *New Formalisms and Literary Theory*, esp. ix-xii; "Data vs. Literature: The Digital Humanities and Literary Studies" 1558).

If telling the history of close reading is complicated in all these ways, introducing versions of it into our classrooms is no less so. The common observation that close reading has remained alive and well pedagogically even in the many circles where it has been dismissed, indeed demonized, in critical debate is only partially true. In the United States today, some teachers see attenuated and limited versions of this method as a minor segment of the skills they teach, and others omit it completely. I was astonished when, hoping to introduce a lively debate, I found that students responded to my question about the advantages and disadvantages of biographical criticism with what can only be described as incredulity. Not only

were they unfamiliar with “the biographical fallacy” rejected by many earlier close readers; in both high school and university they had primarily studied twentieth- and twenty-first century texts, often focusing on issues about ethnicities and the author’s own experiences that did indeed encourage if not apparently mandate biographical discussions. Such training may well explain why so many students—and faculty members—still uncritically repeat the dubious and longstanding proposition that Donne’s poems of mutual, assured love were necessarily written to his wife.

Whatever our students’ prior exposure to or resistance to various forms of close reading may be, whatever other methods and approaches may interest us as teachers and scholars, this training has always been a gift to them for a reason Anderson’s essay powerfully glosses:

To my mind, the special, transferrable skill that English departments offer to society at large resides in a comprehension of English that heightens awareness and enables its effective use. Of course, this awareness includes culture and otherness, past and present, as it does in other humanities departments. But in an English department, it also includes—or should include—a focal interest in the use of the English language. The place of poetry—whether in verse or prose—in heightening verbal awareness and expressive capacity rests in the fact that every word matters in a finely honed poem, as do a variety of connections among these words. (163)

If the study of language is the central skill—indeed the central gift—we can give them, close reading is one of the best (though of course not the only) way of developing acuity about language, and Donne’s own poetry is one of the best routes towards “heightening verbal awareness and expressive capacity.”

Teaching close reading as a route to intensifying awareness about language is especially important in the United States today for additional reasons. Partly in response to students’ and parents’ demand for university training that can be, or can be touted as being, a ready avenue to a job, potential English majors often turn to other fields, notably majors like Communications when offered. But in fact teaching—and celebrating—the skills close reading builds, besides its other virtues, can provide a valuable example of how the range of

analytical and critical techniques taught in an English major can prepare undergraduates for a range of jobs. Similarly, the structure of many English majors is often being reconceived in terms of tracks (creative writing, expository writing, publishing and so on) that appeal to many students but in so doing subordinate one of the principal reasons the English major had originally attracted them, the opportunity to read exciting and challenging writings. Training in close reading can restore to students enthusiasm about those writings, and awareness of the many reasons engaging with them is valuable. In short, one need not choose between the intellectual and aesthetic pleasures of reading on the one hand and pre-vocational preparation on the other: it is clear that many employers in a range of fields value the attention to language that close reading can engender. Indeed, the English major opens a range of doors rather than slamming others shut: it can provide the pleasures of reading, say, Donne, and the advantages of acquiring skills in reading and one's own writing that will be professionally useful.

Finally, as the essays in this section of *Connotations* say explicitly at a few junctures and implicitly at many others, the acuity about language that close reading can engender is essential to our lives as citizens. I for one feel strongly we should not introduce discussions of contemporary political issues into classrooms on other subjects. (Exceptions may arise in courses where those issues conform to the subject matter of the course, such as one on the literature of immigration, and even there, care and respect for a range of opinions, not least those whose proponents may not feel comfortable expressing them, are mandated.) But whatever our own political credos may be, whatever attitudes our students may have inherited or acquired, training in close reading is training in approaching all texts, from extended political speeches to tweets, discriminatingly.

Any reference to tweets invites consideration of the impact of digitalization on both our pedagogy and our scholarship. We live in cultures—and teach in universities—where digests replace digestion and rapid encapsulation triumphs over more measured examination.²

Throughout his teaching and writing, but notably in his *Fields of Light*, Reuben Arthur Brower emphasized reading slowly, not just closely, a principle much to the point here. I am not the first to observe the potential conflict between involvement if not obsession with digital devices and acuity about rhetorical and other literary devices. Reading a text on a phone, especially from a site lacking annotations, encourages rapidly scrolling through it once. Too likely to assume that rapid conclusions are the goal, many undergraduates do indeed hunt out a message in the negative senses that contributed to the disdain for that concept. And too prone to seeing academic work as a series of yes-no questions most readily answered by finding the right site on a phone or computer, many undergraduates sorely, urgently need the alertness to ambiguities that close reading can provide. But not only the threats but also the potentialities of digitalization provide yet another reason—and strategy—for incorporating close reading into our classes. Although the proponents of so-called distant reading celebrate the emphasis on the digital whose absence putatively enfeebled earlier methods in benighted ages, in fact close reading has already benefitted from—and in turn benefitted, digital searches. DiPasquale's essay both asserts and proves the ways contemporary technology can enrich the questions she explores.³

Anderson's article establishes a telling contrast between two collections; symmetrically, many issues discussed in the Anderson and DiPasquale essays and in my own contribution here are encapsulated in the overviews of close reading by two distinguished critics, Harry Berger, Jr. and Richard Strier. Both subscribe to the variousness I also advocate above, but they differ sharply from each other in their approach to that issue, their announced affiliations, and their conclusions. In the analysis of close reading discussed above, Berger identifies himself as "a Reconstructed Old New Critic" (20). On the other hand, in his recent "New Formalism, New Historicism, and Thy Darling in an Urn," Strier sharply and determinedly distinguishes the close reading he embraces, which focuses on rhetoric, from the practices he identifies with Cleanth Brooks, whose emphasis on

imagery Strier rejects. Thus Strier's diachronic changes create a line in the sand. In contrast, in his own emphasis on the range of the movement, Berger facilitates a broader and often paradoxical affiliation with close reading—and certainly not an unproblematical relationship to it. Witness how he creates a relatively peaceful flock by—dare one say—shepherding together the postulates he associates with New Criticism, his own work, and newer, ostensibly antagonistic, enterprises.

What factors and predilections can help to explain these divergent approaches? We should acknowledge a generational difference: although only about a decade probably separates these two critics, Berger, as he emphasizes, was trained and launched in the heyday of these methods, while Strier's graduate training and early career occurred in the late 1960s and the 1970s, a period of more open and intense competition among methods. Perhaps too temperamental divergences? Was the decision variously to focus on one leader of New Criticism and to acknowledge distinctions in the movement cause or effect of these readers' preferences for distance from it or affiliation, however qualified and limited, with it? In any event, my aim is not to celebrate one of these alternatives over the other but rather to juxtapose them as examples of the challenges of returning to close reading today.

But however one glosses this contrast between Berger and Strier, it shows those challenges and the alternatives proposed by these two critics and by Anderson and DiPasquale. How should one define and describe close reading and New Criticism? should the connections between them be accepted more than interrogated? and what are the rewards and the dangers—the stakes in several senses—of how one represents these movements to our students and engage with them in our own careers?

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NOTES

¹Matthew Zarnowiecki, another participant in the session at the 2018 Modern Language Association in New York from which the Anderson and DiPasquale essays developed, demonstrated the many rewards of looking at the interplay of music and poetry, including the blurring of the contrast between close and distant reading, in his presentation there.

²Tellingly, even the *New York Times*, whose investigative reporting models the triumphs of slow, meticulous research and the thoughtful reading it invites, now also includes snippets and tidbits on its third page, perhaps because readers now seek or, indeed, expect them even if they also value that investigative reporting.

³For another important demonstration of the interaction between digitalization and close reading, see Witmore and Hope.

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