Affordances and limitations of algorithmic criticism

Verhaar, P.A.F

Chapter 2

Close Reading

2.1. History and definition

In his *ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound famously characterised literature as "news that stays news".[111] Literary texts, and poems in particular, typically evoke an intricate set of visceral responses within readers, producing a mysterious appeal which compels readers to revisit and to reinterpret them repeatedly. Computation can be viewed as a method that can be used to strengthen and to invigorate this process of news-gathering. Digital methods may enable scholars to study the multifarious qualities of works of literature in a highly systematic manner, and they may potentially expose textual properties that remain hidden when texts are studied via more conventional methods. This thesis aims to understand the novel mode of studying literature that is engendered by machine reading by comparing it to scholarship based on close reading, which may be viewed as the dominant method for analysing literary texts in the physical realm. As a first step, the current chapter describes the main qualities of the close reading method. These qualities will be contrasted with the possibilities produced by digital methods in the following chapters.

Close reading is a broad term, which is commonly used to refer to a deeply attentive type of engagement in which readers minutely scrutinise the vocabulary, the grammar and the literary techniques found within individual fragments. It can be used to refer to a particular mode of reading, as well as to a description of the results of this type of reading. On the basis of this capacious description of close reading, it may be surmised that it has already been practiced for several centuries in studies on ancient rhetoric, in biblical exegesis and in classical philology.[112] Andrew DuBois concurs that "reading and responding to what one reads is an ancient practice, of which there exists a library of examples ecclesiastical, ecstatic, dogmatic, incidental, and so on".[113] Neil McCaw observes that the methods which are discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics* and in the works of the Greek critic Longinus may equally be viewed as forms of close reading.[114] In this thesis, the term close

[111] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber 1991), p. 29.
[112] David Schur, "An Introduction to Close Reading", (1998).
[113] Andrew DuBois, "Introduction", in: Frank Lentricchia & Andrew DuBois (eds.), *Close Reading: The Reader*, Durham N.C.: Duke University Press 2003, p. 1.
[114] Neil McCaw, *How to Read Texts: A Student Guide to Critical Approaches and Skills* (London: Continuum 2008), p. 15.

reading will be used primarily to denote the form of textual engagement which came to prominence during the twentieth century, and which has since had a decisive impact on the nature of literary research.

The origins of the modern conception of close reading are commonly traced to the method of practical criticism that was developed in the late 1920s by I.A. Richards. One of Richards' central tenets was that the critical assessment of a work ought to be based solely on "the words on the page",[115] and that literary interpretation ought not to be affected by any knowledge of the historical circumstances in which the text was produced or of the author's biography. In his monograph *Practical Criticism*, Richards discusses a method which emerged from a series of pedagogical experiments conducted at Cambridge in which he asked students to analyse texts without supplying any information on their authors, titles or dates of creation. Richards' aim in removing these paratextual aspects was to identify potential causes of misreading and to address "the chief difficulties of criticism". Such complications include an inability to apprehend the central meaning of the text, an inattentiveness to the sonic effects, the potential influence of "mnemonic irrelevances" such as personal memories and the penchant for producing "stock responses" when views and affections are already formed before the start of the reading process.[116] Richards opines that a slow, critical and unbiased form of reading was essential to ensure that readers can be fully susceptible to the nuances and the ambiguities that can be produced by literary techniques.

The method of practical criticism became deeply influential after its adoption by the New Critics. Jessica Pressman stresses, however, that New Criticism, like close reading, is a highly unclear term. It does not have a single manifesto, and there are no clear statements of the objectives of the movement.[117] The ideas that came to be associated with New Criticism were spawned by a loosely organised group of scholars and poets hailing from the Southern United States, including John Ransom, Cleanth Brooks and William Wimsatt. Whereas individual theorists have placed different emphases, the New Critics were largely united in their conviction that literary texts ought to be analysed as autonomous objects, and independently of their social, historical and political contexts. Works were treated mostly as "verbal artefacts that transcend their compositional occasions and context".[118] Wimsatt and Beardsley categorically reject critical approaches in which the author's stated intentions are used as a basis for an interpretation of a text. A literary text is "detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond

[115] Ivar Armstrong Richards, *Practical Criticism : A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: K. Paul Trench Trubner 1929), p. 4.

[116] Ibid., pp. 13–15.

[117] Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), p. 12.

[118] Adam Piette, "Contempory Poetry and Close Reading", in: Peter Robinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, p. 231.

his power to intend about it or control it".[119] New Criticism was a formalist type of criticism which concentrated predominantly on structural and formal textual aspects, such as the grammatical structure, diction and literary devices.[120] Many New Critical readings of literary works are based on the conviction that there ought to be an organic unity between the form and the central meaning of the text. Critics typically aimed to demonstrate that the various linguistic and literary signs of a text all work in unison to produce its total effect.[121]

DuBois explains that New Criticism consisted of a "radical response to arcane Indo-European philology" and to a "historical scholarship that seems more deeply interested in sociology and biography than in literature".[122] The literary research of the first two decades of the twentieth century concentrated for a large part on philology, literary history and "impressionistic belletristic commentary",[123] and texts were often viewed primarily as historical documents carrying information about historical developments. According to Alan Liu, the historicist approaches which were attacked by the New Critics were essentially based on a form of distant reading, culling "archives of documents to synthesize a "spirit" (Geist) of the times, nations, languages, and peoples".[124] In his influential essay "Criticism Inc.", John Ransom writes that literary research was in danger of becoming "a branch of the department of history", and maintains that critics "must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature".[125] The New Critics pressed for a form of literary criticism which concentrated mostly on the formal and rhetorical features of the text, rather than on the text's author or on the text's reception. Critics such as John Ransom and Cleanth Brooks in particular aimed to demonstrate, moreover, that texts can be investigated thoroughly and with intellectual rigour. Ransom envisaged an objective form of criticism which is "more scientific, or precise and systematic".[126] While the New Critics strongly opposed the cold rationalism of the sciences, viewing its objectives as antithetical to the nature of humanistic research, they generally aimed to gain legitimacy for their approach by propagating a form of textual engagement which is ostensibly as meticulous and as accurate as the procedures used within the natural sciences.[127]

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[119] W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky 1954), p. 5.
[120] Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media*, p. 17.
[121] Stephen Matterson, "The New Criticism", in: *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, p. 168.
[122] Andrew DuBois, "Introduction", p. 3.
[123] Miranda B. Hickman, "Introduction: Rereading the New Criticism", in: Miranda B. Hickman & John D. McIntyre (eds.), *Rereading the New Criticism*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2012, p. 10.
[124] Alan Liu, "Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?", in: Matthew Gold (ed.), *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, University of Minnesota Press 2012, p. 492.
[125] John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism Inc.", in: *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Autumn (1937), p. 589.
[126] Ibid., p. 587.
[127] Miranda B. Hickman, "Introduction: Rereading the New Criticism", p. 8.

After the close reading method had been consolidated across English departments and creative writing courses across the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, New Criticism increasingly lost its authority in the 1960s and 1970s. The decline of the New Criticism's dominance is often connected to the emergence of deconstructionist or post-structuralist theories, and to a growing dissatisfaction with the fact that the New Critics confined the literary canon to a small group of authors whose works can productively yield to ahistorical and formalist analyses. The predilection to concentrate on well-constructed and self-contained poetry led to the ennoblement of Modernist and metaphysical poetry, written predominantly by "white male" authors,[128] and to an indifference to literature produced by marginalised communities and ethnic minorities. Gallop notes that the New Critical anti-historical approach "has been persuasively linked to sexism, racism and elitism".[129] The fierce criticism of New Criticism precipitated a number of theoretical correctives. In response to the stalwart formalism of the New Critics, scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Frederic Jameson argued for the need to recognise the influence of historical circumstances, and their views materialised through the formation of New Historicism, which aimed to "combat empty formalism by pulling historical considerations to the centre stage of literary analysis".[130] Theorists associated with reader-response theory additionally critiqued the claim that the meaning of the text can be extracted exclusively by studying the text itself, and posited that meaning is a social construct, depending strongly on literary socialisation and on contingent ideas of what constitutes meaning.[131]

Despite the fact that New Criticism had become a superseded paradigm towards the end of the twentieth century, the close reading method, which the New Critics helped to develop and to disseminate, continued to be of scholarly relevance. While the New Critical dismissal of history and of politics have frequently been targeted critically, close reading in itself has rarely been opposed. Adam Piette emphasises that close reading remained a key activity within semiotic, deconstructionist and post-structuralist schools of criticism.[132] The intricate ambiguities and conflicts which are scrutinised in deconstruction, for instance, can only be disclosed after minute examinations of syntax, vocabulary, devices and

[128] Cecily Devereux, ""A Kind of Dual Attentiveness": Close Reading after the New Criticism", in: Miranda B Hickman & John D McIntyre (eds.), *Rereading the New Criticism*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2012, p. 218.

[129] Jane Gallop, "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading", in: *Profession*, (2007), p. 181.

[130] Harold Veeser, *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge 1989), p. xi.

[131] Clare Connors, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oneworld 2010), p. 49.

[132] Adam Piette, "Contempory Poetry and Close Reading", pp. 4–5.

structures.[133] Gallop, more strongly, refers to deconstruction as the "offspring" of New Criticism and claims that, rather than challenging the centrality of close reading, it "infused it with a new zeal".[134] Even in readings informed by critical theory, the need to "establish the intrinsic context of the literary object" remains pivotal, as, without a solid apprehension of the nature of the text, "all extrinsic moves (which are also contextual moves) are themselves suspicious".[135]

Importantly, the close reading method must not be equated automatically with the type of textual engagement which was endorsed by New Criticism, since, as was noted, the method had originally been established by British scholars associated with practical criticism. The New Critics "did an enormous disservice to close reading"[136] by denying the relevance of historical and biographical material. As is indicated by Piette, William Empson's critical analysis of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73* in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is enlivened appreciably by references to Shakespeare's personal life, to Puritan iconoclasm, and to ecclesiastical life during the English Reformation. While the New Critics do not explicitly explain why such use of historical materials is inadmissible, this inattention to the "historical imagination" crucially divested the close reading method of one of its "most vital source of energy".[137]

It must be stressed, nevertheless, that the New Critics were not fully anti-historical. In his preface to the 1968 edition of *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks concedes that poems "do not grow like cabbage, nor are they put together by computors [sic]". As a text is undeniably created by a human author, it can be relevant "to consider his ideas, his historical conditioning, his theories of composition, and the background, general and personal, which underlies his work". It is considered permissible, moreover, to base interpretations partly on "the response of the reader".[138] McCaw explains that the New Critics recommended a "layered approach",[139] in which an initial strong focus on the poem as an autonomous and independent construction can be followed by an explanation of the text, in which

[133] Deconstruction is a school of philosophy which is centrally concerned with the manner in which texts produce their meaning. Jacques Derrida stresses that words only produce meaning via their contrasts with other words. Although the various theorists associated with deconstruction, on some points, have differing views on its more concrete applications within literary criticism, deconstructionist critical readings typically aim to pursue the alternative ways in which a text can generate meaning, next to the dominant sense which is seemingly intended. Analyses, for this reason, often entail a detailed and a recurrent consideration of the text's oppositions, contradictions and omissions. See Alex Thompson, "Deconstruction", in: Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006.

[134] Jane Gallop, "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading", p. 182.

[135] Andrew DuBois, "Introduction", p. 8.

[136] Adam Piette, "Contempory Poetry and Close Reading", p. 231.

[137] Ibid., p. 233.

[138] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dennis Dobson 1968), p. x.

[139] Neil McCaw, *How to Read Texts: A Student Guide to Critical Approaches and Skills*, p. 55.

data about the author or about the cultural context can be applied usefully. In interpretation of poems which are overtly political, such as Yeats's *Easter 1916* or Marvell's *An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*, it seems virtually impossible to forego references to historical events. Form and language formed the centre of critical attention, nevertheless, and this focus was often at the expense of an interest in the social and cultural background of texts.

While New Historicism, in an important sense, managed to compensate for the New Critical lack of historical awareness, the approach has been accused, in turn, of neglecting the specificity of literary form,[140] and of focusing the theoretical lens too narrowly on texts as carriers of information. Jane Gallop claims that, while it is important to study texts within their historical and cultural contexts, the lack of attention to language and to form also blurs the distinction between literary criticism and historical research. Marjorie Perloff facetiously refers to cultural criticism as "social sciences without statistics".[141] Since the 1990s, a growing number of literary theorists have sought to reposition close reading as the focal point of literary criticism, while simultaneously drawing attention to the historical contingency of literary form. Terry Eagleton, for instance, advocates "a dual attentiveness", in which scholars are sensitive both to "the grain and texture of literary works" and to "cultural contexts".[142] The emerging New Formalist movement likewise fuses the objectives of New Criticism and New Historicism and recognises the simultaneous importance of close reading and of historical contextualisation. New Formalism aims to pay close attention to form "without succumbing to either the reactionary conservatism or the ahistorical and apolitical nature of New Criticism". At the same time, it aims to understand "the role form plays without compromising our understanding of history, cultural context, and the mandates of post-structuralist literary inquiries".[143]

Close reading is best viewed as a generic formalist method which can be employed equally by different schools of literary theory, albeit with varying implementations. Frank Lentriccia explains that, while the precise boundaries of close reading are uncertain, the "commitment to close attention to literary texture and what is embodied there"[144] forms a common ground for many theoretical orientations. Jane Gallop stresses that the essence of literary studies does not lie in the nature of the texts that are being read, but, rather, in the fact that it analyses texts via the method of close reading. Katherine Hayles stresses similarly that, after the New Critical hold on the literary canon was terminated, and after literary studies

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[140] Miranda B. Hickman, "Introduction: Rereading the New Criticism", p. 3.
[141] Majorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (University of Alabama Press 2004), p. 13.
[142] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Malden Mass.: Blackwell Pub. 2007), p. 8.
[143] Verena Theile, "New Formalism(s): A Prologue", in: Verena Theile & Linda Tredennick (eds.), *New Formalisms and Literary Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013, p. 12.
[144] Frank Lentricchia, "Preface", in: Frank Lentricchia & Andrew DuBois (eds.), *Close Reading: The Reader*, Durham: Duke University Press 2002, p. ix.

expanded its scope to include works of popular culture, close reading assumed "a preeminent role as the essence of the disciplinary identity".[145]

Despite the fact that there are marked differences between the forms of close reading that have been propagated by practical criticism, New Criticism and deconstructionist criticism, McCaw usefully argues that close reading can be defined by three central features. A first characteristic is that the method is primarily concerned with the text as an independent unit. Close reading, secondly, aims to illuminate the meaning of the text "through an examination of how it operates". A third central assumption is that the context of the text is of less importance than the language.[146] The first characteristic that is identified by McCaw — the notion that close reading takes place at the level of individual texts, or at the level of shorter fragments within individual texts — is particularly useful in distinguishing close reading from other modes of studying texts. Close reading mostly begins with the identification of occurrences of distinct literary devices or of noteworthy vocabulary, and its eventual objective is to analyse how these phenomena interact at the level of sentences, paragraphs or stanzas. At the level of these textual units, the various literary devices may reinforce each other, or they may cause striking conflicts or paradoxes. Formalist critical approaches such as structuralism and Russian Formalism, by contrast, were often interested in aggregations which exceeded the individual text. Smith explains that structuralist critics created abstractions of texts "with the aid of stratified levels of conceptual categories",[147] in order to investigate the linguistic characteristics of literary genres or periods in their entirety. The Russian Formalists likewise studied the linguistic aspects of works in order to contribute eventually to an understanding of the general laws and the *literariness* of literary language. Vladimir Propp, for instance, reduced formal aspects of individual literary works to instances of distinct categories in order to describe their generic principles. In one of his best-known studies, Propp classified the narratives contained in Russian fairy tales on the basis of 31 cardinal functions.[148] Formalist readings which aim to expose the broader patterns within

[145] Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, pp. 57–58.
[146] Neil McCaw, *How to Read Texts: A Student Guide to Critical Approaches and Skills*, p. 56.
[147] John B. Smith, "Computer Criticism", p. 24.
[148] See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1968). Similar conceptualisations were developed by Skaftymov, who viewed elements of the plot or features of literary characters as components within an overarching aesthetic structure and by Reformatsky, who concentrated on the structural relations between a work's themes, motives and plots. See John B. Smith, "Computer Criticism", p. 22.

large collections of texts partly foreshadow the aims of the approach which has been referred to more recently as "distant reading".[149]

Since the level of analysis forms an important distinctive characteristic of close reading, it is useful to introduce terminology that can be used to describe the two main levels that can be distinguished. In this thesis, the term "micro-level" is used to refer to the level of sentences, paragraphs or stanzas, at which literary scholars can observe individual textual units, such as words or literary devices, within their original context. Analyses at the macro-level, conversely, aim their attention at corpora consisting of multiple texts.[150] Potentially, a third plane of analysis may be distinguished in between the micro-level and the macro-level. Next to collecting data about large collections of literary works, scholars can also aggregate discrete data at the level of individual texts. Such operations can reveal aspects about the text as a whole, but they have the effect that scholars lose the ability to study textual units in their original context. This latter form of research will be viewed as a specific form of macro-analysis, however, as this thesis is mostly concerned with the differences between the focus on individual text fragments and the focus on abstract rendition of texts, created on the basis of quantitative data about such fragments.[151]

Following McCaw's concise conceptualisation, it may be claimed that close reading is centrally defined by two central activities. Close reading consists, on a first level, of a minute descriptive analysis of formal aspects such as syntax, vocabulary, diction and literary devices. It is based on a protracted attention to the form and to the language of the literary work. Jane Gallop stresses that close reading demands "looking at what is actually on the page, reading the text itself, rather than some idea 'behind the text'". The method demands the capacity "to

[149] Smith explains that this objective was achieved only partially, as many of the structural elements which are studied by structuralists were "never codified a set of methods or techniques that is adequate and general enough to accommodate close, sophisticated analyses of a variety of literary works" (p. 15). Many of the structuralist schools are defined by "the impracticality of applying their perspectives to large, full length texts" (p. 25). See John B. Smith, "Computer Criticism".

[150] The definition of the micro-level and the macro-level differ slightly from the way in which these terms have been defined by Matthew Jockers. According to Jockers, micro-analyses focus on aspects of a single text, meso-analyses concentrate on small text corpora, and macro-analyses explore properties of large text corpora. See Matthew Jockers, *Text Analysis with R for Students of Literature* (Springer, 2014), p. 4. As I assumed that it can be difficult to make a sharp and consistent distinction between small corpora and large corpora, the terms "micro-analysis" and "meso-analysis" have been redefined.

[151] It must be noted, also, that the definitions which have been given partly hinge on the definition of the term "text". If a text can be a short story, an examination of a collection of short stories would form an example of an analysis at the macro-level. Conversely, there may also be reasons for viewing the full collection of stories as a single text. This text will abstract from such complications, however. In cases where there may be confusion, the context will clarify the signification of these terms as much as possible.

read NOT what SHOULD BE on the page but what IS".[152] A second core activity can be referred to as interpretation. The aim of interpretation is generally to illuminate the meaning of a text, but, importantly, in the case of literary works, it also focuses on the manner in which the various formal features of a text contribute to the text's general meaning. Importantly, critics can be interested both in the confluence and in the conflicts between form and meaning. While New Critics have claimed that form and semantics need to cohere organically, deconstructionist critics are primarily attentive to the collisions that can arise between the language and the message that is conveyed by this language. These two central activities, descriptive analysis and interpretation, will be discussed in more detail in the following section. With respect to close reading, the act of evaluation may potentially be identified as a third activity. Close reading can help scholars to make a critical assessment of the literary quality of a text. Evaluation will not be viewed as a core component of close reading, however, but as an additional objective which the method of close reading is expected to support. This chapter closes with a brief section about the qualitative assessment of works of literature.

2.2. Components of close reading

2.2.1. Descriptive analysis

According to Roman Jakobsen, literary texts have a "poetic function" which refers to the "set (*Einstellung*) towards the message as such". There is frequently a "focus on the message for its own sake".[153] New Critics have often stressed that because of the importance of form, literary works cannot be paraphrased. Cleanth Brooks stresses that poetry must be considered as a structure, in which the various components have been arranged meticulously in order to produce a cumulative effect. While it is possible to describe what the poem is generally about, such a paraphrase is not "the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem".[154] Literary texts have a "meaning that cannot be made by other means".[155]

A close reading of a literary work often commences with an examination of the text's linguistic aspects and of the literary devices that have been used. Marjorie Perloff explains that literary research can be viewed as "a branch of rhetoric". Rhetoric concentrates on the manner in which a text is composed, and, within literary criticism, this mainly entails "the examination of diction and syntax,

[152] Jane Gallop, "The Ethics of Reading", in: *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, (2000), pp. 7–8. Capitals are in the original.
[153] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", in: Thomas A Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, Advances in Semiotics, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1960, p. 356.
[154] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, pp. 158–160.
[155] David Schur, "An Introduction to Close Reading", n.pag.

rhythm and repetition, and the various figures of speech".[156] The identification of these core properties eventually forms the basis for more sagacious analyses. This section provides a brief synopsis of the textual phenomena which can be examined during descriptive analyses. The scope will be limited to characteristics of poetry, for two reasons. The New Critics were interested in texts which displayed instances of irony, paradox and ambiguity, and, because of this aim, many of the New Critics were predominantly concerned with poems, which typically "traffic in disruption and disorientation".[157] This section also places a special emphasis on the close reading of poetry because of the fact that the case study presented in this thesis centres around a corpus consisting of poems. As it is impossible to do full justice to the manifold ways in which scholars have investigated poetry, however, this overview does not aspire to be exhaustive. While the description of the literary phenomena that follows may additionally be perceived as reductive or as somewhat trite, the main aim of this section is to develop an elemental framework which can be used in subsequent chapters as a basis for a comparative analysis of traditional practices and computational approaches.

Costas Dallas notes that research projects in the humanities commonly start with an "[i]dentification of the activity or product to be explained, and resolution into elements". The elements which are identified are subsequently described "in terms of the 'language' of the discipline at hand".[158] The discipline of literary criticism has devised an elaborate system of terms which may be used to classify particular textual aspects, and, in agreement with Dallas' observations, analyses of poetry often consist of the isolation of particular textual phenomena for closer inspection, and of the subsequent application of literary terms. Piette explains that "close reading is a habit of attention to the ways the different kinds of material come together in the formal design" and that the analysis "simply separates out the elements so they become plainer to see".[159] The descriptive analysis of a literary work typically consists of the recognition of a textual element as an instance of a particular literary device. In this thesis, the term "literary device" will be used as "an all-purpose term used to describe any literary technique deliberately employed to achieve a specific effect".[160]

An extensive range of terms is available, for example, for describing the elements that can be identified during a prosodic analysis. Prosody, more specifically, is the study of sonic and rhythmic characteristics, and it entails the examination of rhyme, rhythm and metre. Phenomena such as end rhyme and metre crucially come into existence as a result of the fact that the poetic text is

[156] Majorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, p. 6.
[157] Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media*, pp. 14–15.
[158] Costis Dallas, "Humanistic Research, Information Resources and Electronic Communication", p. 211.
[159] Adam Piette, "Contempory Poetry and Close Reading", p. 238.
[160] "Device", in Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: 2009), p. 85.

divided into separate lines.[161] Mary Oliver explains that the word "verse" derives from a Latin word signifying "to turn".[162] By turning the various verse lines, the poet establishes particular linguistic units, and can begin to craft phonetic and rhythmic patterns within lines and across lines. Verse lines which are written in accentual-syllabic metre generally have a regular number of stressed and unstressed syllables, and such lines can often be classified by considering the type of verse feet that are used (e.g. iamb, trochee, spondee, dactyl) and the total number of feet in each line (e.g. trimeter, tetrameter, hexameter).[163] The term "rhythm" is used to refer to the overall speed of the verse lines. Eagleton describes rhythm as one of the most "primordial" of poetic features. While metre supplies a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, rhythm often varies from line to line. The rhythm of a verse line can be determined by the use of pauses such as line endings or caesura, and by alterations of long vowels, short vowels and consonant clusters. If a line mainly consists of short vowels and single consonants, in mono-syllabic words, the rhythm is generally experienced as fast. Rhyme, thirdly, is a very familiar technical device in poetry. It consists of "a unity of identity and difference".[164] Lines which rhyme perfectly share final phoneme sequences. When there is only an agreement in the sounds of consonants or of vowels, such agreements are referred to as pararhymes or slant rhymes.

A broad range of terms are likewise available for the description of the form of a poem. While poems can be stichic, meaning that there is simply a sequence of verse lines,[165] many poems are divided into stanzas. Stanzas can be characterised by considering the number of lines, the rhyming schemes and the metrical patterns which are used within these stanzas. One example of a two-line form is the heroic couplet, which consists of two rhyming iambic pentameters. Three line-forms can either be triplets, in which all lines rhyme, or tercets, in which one or more lines do not rhyme. Four-line types may be single-rhymed, cross-rhymed, couple-rhymed, among other types. These basic forms can be combined into forms which contain larger number of lines, such as sonnets, villanelles, sestinas or octava rima. Poems can also have an open form, which means that the form is variable.[166]

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[161] Eagleton defines a poem as "a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end", see Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem,* p. 25. This particular description, which may sound slightly pedestrian, implies that features such as rhyme or meter do not serve as defining characteristics of poetry. Eagleton explains that there are many poems which lack any rhyme or rhythms, while there are simultaneously many examples of prose texts in which poetic techniques such as rhyme or alliteration are used abundantly.

[162] Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1994), p. 35.

[163] The description or the visualisation of the metre is generally referred to as "scansion".

[164] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, p. 132.

[165] John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism* (Oxford [u.a.]: Oxford Univ. Press 2005), p. 24.

[166] Ibid., pp. 23–33.

In classical rhetoric, a distinction is often made between "tropes" or "figures of thought", which are literary devices in which "words or phrases are used in a way that effects a conspicuous change in what we take to be their standard meaning", and "figures of speech" which "depart from what is experienced by users as standard, or literal, language mainly by the arrangement of their words to achieve special effects".[167] This distinction, together with the associated terminology, is often contested, however.[168] Baldick states that the term "figurative language" can be used to refer either to "[a]n expression that departs from the accepted literal sense or from the normal order of words", or to one "in which an emphasis is produced by patterns of sound". Devices such metaphor, metonymy, simile and personification may be viewed as examples of devices based on shifts in meaning. Devices such as assonance, consonance and alliteration are centrally based on repetitions of sounds. A large number of literary devices produce emphasis through the placement or the repetition of words or of sections of words, such as anaphora, chiasmus or polyptoton.

Analyses of poetry may also concentrate on their diction or on their syntax. Diction refers to the words which are chosen to express a particular message, including the reason for and the consequences of such choices. Diction can be classified as formal or colloquial, as concrete or abstract, or as complicated or simple. Words may be of a Germanic or of a Romance origin, and they may be polysyllabic or monosyllabic.[169] In poetry, the demands of metre and rhyme often place restrictions on the vocabulary. Words typically belong to a particular register of speech. The words in a text are often taken from the same register, but, when different registers are combined, this often draws attention to particular words.[170] The syntax of a text, furthermore, may be "clear or unclear", or "verbose or economic". Analyses may concentrate on occurrences of particular syntactic constructions, such as split infinitives, passive and active constructions,[171] or on the occurrences of personal pronouns. In stylistic research, it can be revealing to study shifts in perspective, such as that from a first person singular to a second person singular. In poetry, the syntax is often deliberately complicated. The meaning of a sentence may be confounded because of an unconventional word order, or because of the fact that the part of speech of individual words are unclear. Syntax, as such, can clearly contribute to the overall ambiguity of poetic texts.

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[167] Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers 1993), p. 344.

[168] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*.

[169] John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism*, pp. 103–105.

[170] *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2012), p. 358.

[171] John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism*, pp. 120–121.

In his monograph *How to Read a Poem*, Eagleton discusses a number of additional terms which may be used to characterise poetry. The mood of a text, first, describes its general atmosphere. The text's tone refers more specifically to the manner in which this atmosphere is expressed. It is the general attitude which is conveyed. According to Eagleton, a tone can be "exultant", "jubilant", "bombastic", "arch, abrupt, dandyish, lugubrious, rakish, obsequious, urbane, exhilarated, imperious".[172] "Volume" refers to the loudness or the softness of a line. The presence of many exclamation marks may indicate a high volume. The "intensity" of a poem refer to the density of particular devices. The intensity of a poem is frequently experienced as high when it contains many literary devices which are based on forms of repetition, such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme or polyptoton. The texture, finally, is the degree to which "a poem weaves its various sounds into palpable patterns".[173] Describing the texture demands attention to occurrences of sharp consonants such as plosives and softer sounds such as nasal consonants, fricatives and vowels. Eagleton notes that many of the aspects which characterise the style of an author are difficult to formalise.

2.2.2. Interpretation

Close reading often focuses intimately on the language of a literary work. A text invariably has a particular meaning, however, and, an obdurate focus on questions of form "downplays the cognitive import".[174] Next to analysing the form of the text, literary scholars also aim to illuminate the meaning of the text. An investigations of the form is usually regarded as being in the service of the overall illumination of the text's meaning. In a narrow sense, interpretation entails the identification of the theme of a work. A text often describes a specific atmosphere of specific events, but the words of a text typically epitomise more recondite or more abstract concepts at a higher level of abstraction. A theme may be defined as "a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter".[175] Themes do not consist of paraphrases of the plot or of the images which are evoked. According to Robert Scholes, themes represent "a great cultural code" or a "great cultural axis". They are "the generalised oppositions that structure our cultural systems of values". They are mostly described using abstract terms such as "love", "war", or "decay". Robert Scholes argues that the themes of a literary work can often be found by considering the repetitions and oppositions which are evoked in a work.[176] Willy van Peer concurs that themes commonly reflect widespread cultural

[172] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, p. 116.
[173] Ibid., p. 120.
[174] Majorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, p. 7.
[175] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*.
[176] Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1985), pp. 133–134.

anxieties, connected to particular social changes.[177] He adds that they are generally described in a "foregrounded situation" and that they are emotionally charged. An important characteristic of themes, furthermore, is that they tend to resurface in different cultures and in different historical periods.

In *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren stress that an apprehension of the meaning of the text does not exclusively consist of a description of the theme of the text. Whereas the theme, being the central idea of the poem, can mostly by summarised in a single statement, the meaning of the poem is the "basic attitude and idea implied by a poem when it is understood as a whole". Through elements such as mood, tone, diction and imagery, the poet can express a particular emotional response to the theme. Through the rich poetic language, the author aims to convey the "special import of the dramatization of a situation". Brooks and Warren suggest that interpreters ought to be fully susceptible to the effects which are elicited by the interfusion of literary techniques. The meaning can be grasped by "witnessing and taking part in the great human effort to achieve meaning through experience".[178] Northrop Fry explains analogously that literary texts contain complicated semantic fields, which produce effects on many different levels. To fully appreciate the meaning of the text, literary critics need to engage in a highly immersive and attentive form of engagement, and need to be willing to surrender "the mind and senses to the impact of the work as a whole".[179]

The linchpin of the connection between form and content is the presumption that literary devices can have particular connotations and that they can produce particular effects. An iambic metre, for instance, is commonly experienced as exuberant and cheerful. Falling metrical feet, such as dactyls or trochees, may be said to have a negative or a melancholy connotation.[180] Eagleton notes that para-rhymes can produce "mourning, haunting, almost eerie" effects. Literary forms may likewise be connected to specific expectations. Sonnets, for instance, are traditionally "love poems and declarations of courtship", the ottava rima is often thought of as comic, and tetra-metric couplets are conventionally regarded as "epic and serious". [181] An examination of the literary devices that were found during the descriptive analyses may also reveal that different types of literary devices produce effects which are very similar. The haunting effects that are produced by para-rhymes, for instance, may be reinforced within a poem by its use of unconventional

[177] Willie van Peer, "Where Do Literary Themes Come From?", in: Max Louwerse & Willie van Peer (eds.), *Thematics: Interdisciplinary Studies*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins 2002, pp. 255–260.
[178] Cleanth Brooks, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston 1960), p. 267.
[179] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1957), p. 77.
[180] John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism*, p. 6.
[181] Ibid., p. 23.

syntax. As these effects of literary devices often depend on their usage within a particular context, the connotations or the effects of devices are difficult to formalise in logically consistent rules.

Interpretations can be constructed, subsequently, by connecting the patterns that emerge from an analysis of the effects of literary devices to the central themes of the text. David Schur surmises that a literary work consists of "underlying thoughts that have been converted into forms". The relation between form and contents is circular, moreover, as literary authors convert "thoughts into forms and forms into thoughts".[182] The overarching theme can help interpreters to read particular details, and the details of the text may inversely affect the understanding of the general purport of the work. One of the aims of the interpreter may be to demonstrate that the different strata of the text collectively develop a coherent set of ideas.

Brook's and Warren's suggestion that literary interpretation demands "sympathetic imagination"[183] on the part of the reader is strongly reminiscent of the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Interpretation, according to Gadamer, is based on a pre-reflective or non-theoretical form of understanding which differs profoundly from the form of understanding that prevails within the natural sciences. The objective of interpretation is not to extract a singular objectively correct meaning, detached from the person who performs the interpretation. A hermeneutic engagement typically consists of a dialectical process, in which a reader, with unique interests and preconceptions, responds to the particularities and the singularities of the text. The result is a shared product, in which the reader's interests and predilections form an integral part of the meaning that is constructed. The manner in which the meaning ensues is not necessarily bound by an internal logic.[184] Gadamer makes an important distinction between knowing and understanding.[185] Knowing demands that there is a reliable point of view from which the text can be viewed in an objective perspective. The interpretation of a literary work, by contrast, demands an understanding, which arises when the text produces "an increased self-knowledge and insight" on the part of the reader. The main consideration is "whether the interpretation is itself productive or not, whether it opens up new dimension of thought and new lines of inquiry". The validity of the interpretation cannot be assessed separately from the interpreter. A reading may be considered valid if it leads to an "increased, or more productive self-understanding".[186]

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[182] David Schur, "An Introduction to Close Reading", n.pag.
[183] Cleanth Brooks, *Understanding Poetry*, p. 267.
[184] Timothy Clark, "Interpretation: Hermeneutics", in: Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Oxford University Press 2006.
[185] David Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1978), p. 46.
[186] Ibid., p. 49.

The close reading method, and, particularly its interpretative components, invariably demands subjective judgements. During the descriptive analysis, the decision to concentrate on specific elements and to disregard certain other elements is typically based on individual preferences. Texts can be read and interpreted in many different ways. Gadamer stresses, furthermore, that understanding is inescapably rooted within a particular historical situation. An interpretation arises out of a mediation between the text to be interpreted and the historical standpoint of the reader.[187] Different generations reads texts differently, and there "cannot, therefore, be any single interpretation that is correct 'in itself'".[188] A recognition of the historicity and the subjectivity of interpretations appears to lead to a relativism, in which it is impossible to compare the validity of different interpretations on rational grounds. Gadamer underscores, nevertheless, that the interpreter has the obligation to follow the text faithfully and to refrain from actively projecting idiosyncratic ideas onto the text.[189] The fact that the act of interpretation cannot be explained or formalised via an encompassing theory does not mean that it is irrational. Critics ought to describe the unique qualities of the text faithfully, and ought not to rebuild these according to personal insights.[190]

Eagleton argues in a similar vein that, whereas the aspects which are discussed in an interpretative reading rarely have an explicit presence in the texts, these are not completely arbitrary. A critic cannot make the words on the page "mean anything", as the words in a language have meanings which, to some extent, are codified. Word meanings, including both denotations and connotations, are constructed socially. Interpreting a text is "a rule-governed social practice". At the same time, readers are not "inexorably bound by these built-in interpretations".[191] While there is generally a large degree of latitude, words are often bound to a delineated cluster of associated meanings, and a reading can only be perceived as valid if it bases itself on these shared concepts of signification, rather than on deeply personal associations or on purely subjective preferences.

2.3. Evaluation

Next to an analysis of the language of the text and a consideration of the relation between the form and the meaning, critics may also determine whether or not a text has literary value. Robert Scholes refers to this latter activity as criticism proper. A descriptive analysis results in a "text within text", interpretation results in a "text upon text" and the aim of criticism is to produce "text against text".[192]

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[187] David Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 52.
[188] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press 1975), p. 398.
[189] David Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 67.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, p. 109.
[192] Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*, p. 24.

While description and interpretation basically result in a clarification of the work in itself, critics can additionally evaluate the literary quality of a work, and this often demands an extrinsic move, in which the qualities of the work are assessed on the basis of extraneous criteria.

The critical debates concerning the value of literary authors or of literary texts have often focused on the question whether or not it is possible to establish objective grounds for aesthetic judgements.[193] Many scholars associated with practical criticism and with New Criticism have claimed, implicitly or explicitly, that this is possible, and have striven to define the observable properties that determine literary quality. William Epson states that literary works can merit scholarly attention if they can yield to analyses which are intent on exploring multiple, often contradictory, meanings, and, Cleanth Brooks stresses, along similar lines, that poems are valuable if they make use of "the language of paradox" which juxtaposes ideas or connotations which seem incompatible. F.R. Leavis was "virtually obsessed with deciding what did and did not belong in the canon of 'great texts' worthy of further study".[194] In *The Great Tradition*, Leavis rather aggressively declares a list of the "novelists in English worth reading".[195]

A number of scholars have argued, to the contrary, that evaluative assessments can impossibly be motivated objectively. Terry Eagleton stresses that the criteria which are used to establish literary value are inevitably constructed within a particular social and cultural setting. The literary work is not "valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it".[196] Northrop Frye even surmises that, since evaluation cannot be objective, it ought to be avoided by critics. He claims that literary criticism ought to base itself exclusively on observable properties and verifiable claims, and notes that, because there are "no facts" in "the history of taste, [...] the history of taste has no organic connection with criticism".[197] If it is accepted that evaluation is ultimately subjective in nature, the aim to establish the literary value of a work also seems in conflict with Wimsatt's and Beardsley dismissal of the affective fallacy, which entails "a confusion between the poem and its result" and which results from the attempt "to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem".[198] Patricia Waugh concedes that, within literary criticism, there is no value-free position from which a work can be evaluated. A work of literature can only be

[193] Patricia Waugh, "Value: Criticism, Canons and Evaluation", in: Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, p. 70.
[194] Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), p. 382.
[195] Frank Raymond Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* ([New York]: New York University Press 1963), p. 1.
[196] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1983), p. 10.
[197] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 18.
[198] W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, p. 21.

assessed in the light of a particular assumption about what constitutes literary quality, and these assumptions are inevitably particular to individual critical theories. Each conceptualisation of literature "already carries its own implicit value orientation".[199] The value of literary texts have sometimes been demonstrated using the "test of time" argument,[200] which suggests that works of a lesser quality are automatically winnowed out over the course of time. This argument is ultimately circular, however. It does not provide an explicit statement of the aesthetic qualities which have procured the continued interest, besides the endurance of the critical acclaim in itself.

The observation that evaluation cannot be based on stable and objective criteria ought not to lead to the conclusion that it is without relevance or importance, however. In literary studies, as perhaps in humanities research at large, the objective is rarely to provide a conclusive account of a text or to end a debate. As noted above, discussions about the quality of a literary work do not follow a progressive and cumulative programme, and the aim of a particular critical reading is usually to contribute to a discourse rather than to invalidate or to falsify earlier claims. Smallwood stresses that, although evaluative judgements cannot claim to be infallible, and although that they inexorably remain open to debate, evaluation and discrimination is inherent to the nature of criticism, as critics invariably pass judgements on the works they read.[201] A recognition of the fallibility and the situatedness of qualitative assessments might lead to a relativism in which all individual opinions are considered equal. As in the case for interpretations, however, evaluative judgements can be compared by considering the textual evidence that is used to support central arguments. Evaluation should not be based on biased or on fleeting impressions, as critics need to demonstrate that the qualities which are admired or disparaged are genuinely present in the text. Such explanations can enable peers to determine the accuracy and the propriety of the evaluation. To a large extent, the value of the close reading method also lies in the fact that it can enable scholars to collect the supportive evidence that they can ultimately use to buttress and to strengthen their central claims about literary works.

In this chapter, close reading has been defined as a method which concentrates on formal aspects. It is a non-reductive process in which scholars consider the full implications of the linguistic and literary features of a text. Close reading is not a mechanical process but one which is deeply responsive to the specificity of the literary work. As many of the activities which are central to the close reading are unpredictable and context-specific, they crucially resist formalisation. This capri-

[199] Patricia Waugh, "Value: Criticism, Canons and Evaluation", p. 74.
[200] Ibid., p. 73.
[201] Philip Smallwood, "Criticism, Valuation, and Useful Purpose", in: *New Literary History*, 28:4 (1 November 1997), p. 714.

cious and variable nature of close reading appears to be in conflict with the computer's demand for explicit data and for predictable processes, setting pressing and compelling challenges for the very concept of algorithmic criticism.