

The Phased Reading of Media: An Interview with Garrett Stewart

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Garrett Stewart, the James O. Freeman Professor of Letters in the Department of English at the University of Iowa, holds a profound interest in Victorian and modernist fiction, poetics, narrative theory, film and media, as well as art history. He has published more than 20 books, including *Closed Circuits: Screening Narrative Surveillance* (2015), *The Deed of Reading: Literature * Writing * Language * Philosophy* (2015), *Transmedium: Conceptualism 2.0 and the New Object Art* (2017), *The Value of Style in Fiction* (2018), *The One, Other, and Only Dickens* (2018), *Cinemachines: An Essay on Medium and Method* (2019), and *Cinesthesia: Museum Cinema and the Curated Image* (2019). His latest book, *Attention Spans: Garrett Stewart, a Reader*, collects excerpts with commentary from his critical work and is forthcoming from Bloomsbury.

Garrett Stewart is the James O. Freeman Professor of Letters in the Department of English at the University of Iowa. Having held visiting professorships at Fribourg, Konstanz, London, Stanford, and Princeton, he was elected into the Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2010. He is known for a laser-sharp focus on the micro-stylistics of media—first literature, then film, and onto the broader terrain of trans-media and contemporary art. Garrett was my advisor at Iowa, and my theoretical training was very much influenced by his intensive engagement with the texture of each medium. What this has produced, quite productively, is a medial figuration that reshapes as well as reconsolidates its specificity. These frictions are the reason why Garrett was invited to give three talks in Taiwanese academia, one on film,

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another on literature, and the final one on transmedia. In these lectures, linguistic and image-based media are shown to “move itself” and “self-inspect” its own means of production and reproduction in the cultural market of media competition. It is in Rosalind Krauss’s term the “post-medium condition” that we come to realize all remediations are re-specifying the parameters of media.

These reflections are followed through in this brief conversation about our engagement with media and the destiny of aesthetic consumption in the age of large-scale automation. For one thing, the time-sensitive textual signification of materiality, at one point in this interview, is summarized as follows: “The message delivers the medium.” Such a reversal of the McLuhanesque aphorism has to be contextualized through an “elegy” of English as an academic discipline in the United States, for the fact that close-reading as an ekphratic technique may seem more and more distanced from socially-engaged theoretical trends on the rise. That gap, however, is not the only concern: Generative AI is said to initiate a blanket assault on all professions that are related to textual production, and soon we all are going to learn to mobilize, in Ted Chiang’s words, “the blurry JPEG of the internet.” In this cultural war exacerbated by linguistic automatism, it is time we come to reflect, along with a veteran of the discipline, on the destiny of literary pedagogy in this era of ChatGPT and its forced redefinition of human intelligence.

Chang-Min Yu: I think it is prudent to say that your long and illustrious career has spanned the rise and decline of English as an academic discipline in the United States for the past half-century. What are the biggest changes? What are the things that you think are valuable in the field but have faded away? And, of course, what are the pernicious trends that are on the rise?

Garrett Stewart: Emphasis on “long” career. When it dawned on me a few years back that my professional life was “coterminous” with the college teaching of English literature as we in the US have known it, beginning in the 1960s with New Criticism (and its emphasis on close textual explication as a flexible pedagogy in the spread of state-funded public education), my sense of its “terminus” was ironically exaggerated, at least just a bit. There was a crusty sarcasm in my sense of its being “all over” as I was heading toward retirement, since anything like method or literary history had given way to partisan book lists under the dictates—and banner—of social relevance. But now it really is “all over,” institutionally, as more and more departments shift their center of gravity from literary study to creative writing. It’s not just at Iowa, with its famed Writer’s Workshop, International Writing Program, and Nonfiction Writing Program, and its resultant ad campaigns flagging

us as “The Writing University,” that has executed this deliberate shift, but many other departments nationwide—seeing enrollments increase, at least short term, as a result. In the era of branding, our own faculty was polled recently on ideas for a departmental “slogan,” like the tagline for a movie. My satiric bid: “Iowa English: Where Literature is What You Write Yourself.”

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CY: So let me reiterate then: Where and while literature is still being taught at the margin of such restructured departments, what has been, in your view, worth retaining from its pedagogical history? Or, to put it differently, what had been regrettably lost along the way?

GS: Among the many cresting trends going out with the next tide (and in more and more rapid cycles) over the years—New Criticism, semiotics, structuralism, phenomenology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, reader-response criticism, feminism, post-structuralism, Marxian hermeneutics, narratology, New Historicism, queer theory, thing theory, neoformalism, affect studies, the new materialism, object oriented ontology, to name but a few, and more recently, just for instance, Trans studies and ecocriticism—there are broader epochal turning points that emerge in retrospect. This I now realize in looking back on my time, first as student, then as teacher, in the profession of literary study (while it was still thought of as that—and then since). These sea changes, I now see, help explain the minor methodological trends listed above—and seem helpful in framing a response to your query about the expendable versus the enduring. But one short answer first: what has always seemed to me worth preserving, at least for the historical record, is *any* method whatsoever deserving of the name: any functional interpretive strategy rooted in literary form that lends disciplinary weight or anchor to increasingly interdisciplinary projects.

CY: I can certainly see what you mean from the methodological variety of your own writing. But I’m interested in the implied longer answer too—and those broader trends. What are the main overarching changes you allude to?

GS: Looking back, one might think of them as opening up the grounds for discussion and then closing them down again, decades later, by hyper-specialization—or, more accurately, just special interests. First was the shift from lectures to seminars in the late 1960s. What I liked as an undergraduate student was not what I was expected to train for as a doctoral teaching assistant. Where once “explication” was the content as well as the form of literary instruction from

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the podium, suddenly things were up for discussion and debate around a table. At first, this democratization opened up further possibilities for close reading and its evolving New Critical paradigms, even as it began to erode the bulwarks of the canon, as when women or Black students began to wonder out loud about excluded “representation” in the textual sense. As such welcome energies and agendas expanded the classroom forum—here comes Big Change Two—structuralism (and many another theory in its wake) rose above “mere reading” in an account of meaning production, whether linguistically or socially embedded. But the curriculum remained manageable, the texts still mostly shared even in their new profusion, and the subsequent turn to “critical theory” rather than just metalinguistic theory, in other words to sociopolitical critique, could still consolidate an audience around major texts that we were all continuing to read, however much against the grain. But since then, Phase Three, with the “death of theory,” which included a steady attrition in any formalist focus and its use for “close reading,” identitarian bibliographies in “area studies” based on race, ethnicity, gender, and its fluidity, post-colonial hybridities, what have you, have tended to drive scholarship—fueled in part by rapid turnovers in university press sublists and special series—into niche markets that leave little ground for shared conversation at any level other than a general cultural politics. Students who used to be tutored in a skill set now learn a mind set instead. And, maybe more surprising, a language-intense close reading is at no greater premium in creative writing courses than in the proliferation of disparate topics and texts for literary study. In my supervisory role, I’ve visited undergraduate creative workshops devoted to one major writer’s short story per period in which a lively-enough discussion (or say conversation) unfurled without one single quotation brought forward from the literary pages in front of student or teacher.

CY: What you’re characterizing as this fraying or splintering of curricular focus in Phase Three: isn’t that what the taxpaying public, and not just exclusively its right-wing base, has tended to react against in the defunding of arcane as well as so-called PC (politically correct) courses, no longer devoted to “conserving” the literary tradition, call it Shakespeare & Co?

GS: Exactly. And here there are more historical ironies than it’s easy to sort out. Literary study, with little vestige of a canon left, and with department halls resembling an easily parodied shopping mall of boutique outlets, began to seem irrelevant in itself as “general education.” So this downturn in public pertinence—Phase Four—set in when the English major was as a result no longer serviceable in the

training of analytic and writing skills for professions like law or medicine either. But there was more at stake and in flux. Job prospects were shifting to STEM careers across the board, increasingly high tech. And if computer science was now where the action is, why not let any allegiance to Roland Barthes's famous "five codes" of literary construction be swept aside, along with all its challenging kin, by the regime of algorithmic coding? Which, in another ironic twist of fate, brings us to Phase Five, where computer-driven AI (artificial intelligence) is developing so fast—with its threat not just of ready plagiarizing but of undermining the whole notion of "humanities" by machine learning—that an undergraduate Honors thesis, while these still exist, or a PhD dissertation, may soon be electronically submitted with a required "I am not a robot" check box. It's in this light that the flare-up and fading of DH (Digital Humanities) over the last decade can now seem like such a rear-guard catch-up effort, doomed to eclipse by the digital Machine itself. And the Chatbots are just as good at generating a sci-fi fantasy (beyond that of their own come true) as they are at fabricating a paper on frame structure in *The Great Gatsby*. Not just the Writing University, but writing at universities in general, faces whole new challenges.

CY: And partly, as you imply, of their own making.

GS: Right, that's what's so wrong with the whole picture. English departments, having turned from discriminating reading to creative writing just when computers can do the latter faster and more grammatically, have traded what was left of their vanishing social capital with the public for tuition revenue—and no one, however casually happy, is really thriving as they might. What sustains me is not what maintains the system in fiscal solvency: it's instead the rare student who, and not least in this "post-truth" era of public politics, catches the fever of precision and revels in the pleasures of an appreciation never blind to critique.

CY: So is there something to be salvaged and reclaimed from the tradition of rigorous literary study even now, in the face of electronic "discourse production"?

GS: Maybe, but with whose allegiance—and for how long? One thing it is good to remember is that computers can't read. I don't just mean that voice simulation in the audiobook market remains unconvincingly human (to the extent that a listener still cares). I mean that "optical character recognition" (OCR) and the dataset sorting of NLP (Natural Language Processing) are just that: word-processing rather its scrutiny, writing without reading. That's maybe the final irony of what I've

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demarcated as our terminal Phase Five: that this shift from literary study to creative writing is only following suit, with students themselves, not just potentially their bot accomplices, writing without reading. When even graduate students, nurtured in this climate, meet my encouragement to recover the varied skills of close reading—figurative, grammatical, phonetic—by saying, as they more than once have explicitly done lately, “I don’t read for the words, but for the ideas,” I am less disheartened than galvanized with modest new purpose. And for those who get it instinctively, or find themselves gradually converted, one senses the pleasure they have in such mastery. But there’s no denying the vocational downside of the gaping job-market void. And no surprise that students with no profession left that they might join, no guild in which to hone and share their interpretive skills—no surprise that these students would want their time in graduate school, no longer “apprenticing” them for anything in particular, at least to seem “relevant”: to speak to their own political or racial or gender persuasions, tradition and method be damned. Again, mind set rather than skill set.

CY: Beyond this dead end, I wonder if you see any hope for students of *language per se*, interested in its literary manifestations, to address its robot artifice in some usefully analytic way?

GS: Good question, and we’ll see. You and I of course share an interest in film studies, once-so-called, now cinema studies in the aftermath of celluloid film. Here computerization may be said to have enlivened the field, since the radical transformation of the medial base, from visual imprint to digital code, served to produce new objects for old (and of course some new) analytic methods. Book studies had a shot in the arm in this regard as well, but literary studies remained far more stable in its concentration on a self-delimited verbal medium (despite the Kindle revolution), and thus sat still for the shifting analytic protocols that took it as object, watching many interpretive energies go dormant the more perfunctorily “woke” the approach. Will there be for the Chatbot simulation of expressive discourse, analytic or creative, some literature-schooled and metalinguistically sophisticated close reading that will feel genuinely engaged with the new order of word production? I know it was you who was asking the question, but right there is a true *rhetorical* one, in every sense—with time still (perhaps?) for a little close reading: here of the highlighted adjective in its idiomatic versus disciplinary sense, imponderable on the one hand, verbally reflexive on the other. So another way to wonder about this: could there be a supervening stylistics of Natural Language Processing? Short of that, it’s still more interesting to contemplate in our own head what Edith Wharton achieved

when, and then after, imitating the involuted originality of Henry James than to peruse what a computer can do in simulating the early and late style of either—or in producing in micro-seconds a lucid and informed comparative essay on both.

CY: However, even if there is a supervening stylistics of NLP—I am sure there could be—will it fuel the kind of work that has characterized your scholarship? There is certainly a Foucauldian analysis to be done, as Tech companies and their horde of programmers rush to censor whatever outrageous thing ChatGPT has spit out. But in the algorithmic representational space, generative AI goes for the most probable that most of the time compels a forced, tedious transparency of language.

GS: Yes, and such Foucauldian “discourse analysis” could no doubt produce a cogent position paper—the bots could write it themselves—on racial bias in the text-base sampling or on the difficulties involved in the reprogramming of gender pronouns, singular and plural. But I was thinking more about a stylistics of that bland transparency itself that you mention, with its balanced compound predication, its smoothly dutiful subordinations, its minimally polysemous diction, and probabilistic modifiers. A lot less fun, though, were it embarked upon, than looking closely at free indirect discourse in Jane Austen.

CY: Speaking of such preferred scrutiny, and by contrast with the automatism of AI, could you say more about how you understand the relation of the canon to the methodology of close reading?

GS: I’m glad you circled round to that, because it might make for a healthy pedagogical clarification regarding what is still viable in close reading. The rise of New Criticism was certainly attached strategically to texts rich and challenging enough (read: culturally valued) to deserve a neo-Talmudic attention, a secular hermeneutics. And it seems to me to have been a not unholy alliance. Students boosted their interpretive powers as well as their aesthetic appreciation, under compelling inducements, when figuring out metaphoric patterns in Shakespeare, metaphysical conceits in John Donne, couplet punning in Pope, synesthesia in Keats, elusive similes in Dickinson, multilingual word play in Joyce, internal monologue in Woolf, syntactic suspension in Faulkner, you name it: spot it, stumble over it, work to describe it and its thematic consequences. But the same powers of attention are able to survive, and might have done so more vigorously, the explosion of the canon and the proliferation and dispersion of classroom titles. You know the equivalent

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of this yourself from the evolution of cinema studies. Think pantheon rather than canon. Analysis cut its teeth on auteurs from Kurosawa to Kubrick, Ozu to Ophuls, Renoir to Rossellini. But now the same academic attention is lavished on a Lynch or a Tarantino or an Indie cyborg allegory without having to argue for a newly expanded canon; the habit of analysis has become ingrained—when it isn't forgone altogether, that is, in the name of a blanket cultural studies, with no lingering commitment to image analysis. In that case it's like the vestiges of literary study without any cues taken from the language itself of the text supposedly under scrutiny: books read as signs of the times rather than networks of signification. Yet in my own recent writing and teaching, including the microstylistics of contemporary mainstream writers from John le Carré to Colson Whitehead, there's no necessary credentialling of topics by canonical imprimatur. And in my role as graduate mentor, when some students are so disposed (though their number is hardly legion these days), I can assist their projects by guiding them through a productive close reading of anything from (to cite recent examples) techno coinages in a postmodern sci fi novel, whose author I'd barely heard of before receiving their draft chapter, to the challenge of phonetic play in the experimental texts of a contemporary anglo-phone poet entirely new to me. Though a practiced skill, close reading is also, at its most intuitive, an intense form of sight reading: an entirely portable modality of focus.

CY: Building on that, another question then, about your methodology in general. I think it is fair to say that yours is a *layered* reading. In literary studies, it goes from sonic, semic, syllabic, syntactic, symbolic to stylistic. In film and media studies, it begins with frames/pixels, the production of moving pictures, and that something in between and beyond: special effects. In traversing all these layers, there always seems to be a drive toward the ontological. If that is the case, however, isn't the answer always somewhat similar?

GS: "Somewhat similar" would be hard to deny, but it still depends on what you assume the question being "answered" actually is. So I'm especially glad to have your own closing question there—provided that a response can help clarify a broad assumption behind my work. With that big word "ontology" in the air—asking on its own terms, let's say, what "being a text" might mean—I think of Stanley Cavell's sense, from his double-edged subtitle of *The World Viewed*, that movies are themselves "Reflections on the Ontology of Film." A given film's reflex actions are "read" by him as medial "acknowledgments" regarding their own conditions of production and audiovisual projection. I share Cavell's interest in

that sense of ontology, but only as it is activated in viewing practice. Same for literature as, let's say, an art of letters—taking its being from and in words—but only if this isn't thought to recast its impact as just an inscribed mesh of sign functions. May I suspect that there's a not unfamiliar ring to your question, though I know it to be anything but hostile? It reverberates, nonetheless, with the kind of charge leveled long ago against deconstruction: that all its analytic work, when rigorous enough, reduces to the reiterated fact of text as a thing differentially founded on the non-indexical nature of arbitrary signification. Case closed, no matter how many times re-opened: a kind of interpretive vanishing point and hermeneutic dead end. That's not the goal either of my literary or my screen "readings." It's not the ontological *what* that I'm after, the given within the made, so much as what it is that brings it to mind and puts it to use in a motivated narrative context. In an attempt to summarize my previous three books on the evolution of celluloid into digital cinema, including its detours through the video feeds of CCTV and its surveillance plots, I proposed the notion of "apparatus reading" in 2018's *Cinemachines*—parallel to the "narratography" that characterizes my literary reading of prose fiction, with its insistence on the prose itself of such fictions as their own "microplot." At this level of attention, one finds the ingredients of language summoned reflexively in its literary effects, rather than merely aggregated there as the basis of decipherable inscription. Likewise, the point of my film work isn't to "read the apparatus" for the nature of the moving image's own ontological constitution, but rather to read *with* its machinations—through their medium-specified lens—the means by which narrative results are generated. For film as well as prose fiction, style is often my name for the texture of such generation as it becomes, so to speak, a form of content. This is where text meets context without denying the former's own role as interface: where word meets world, means meaning, deviance inference, plot politics, ontology phenomenology. To answer your crucial question, then, requires insisting on what the true question is that spurs my own investigations—and does so across, because always from within, various forms of mediation, both verbal and visual. Not, for film or digital screening, André Bazin's question in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Not *what*, again, but *how* is this narrative episode intrinsically cinematic, whether plastic or electronic at base, and *where* manifested as such, and above all *why*? Or: in what *manner* is a medium's formative *matter* activated for consideration on screen? So your word "layered" is just right, and I hope that when I've written more than once about certain reflexive texts in which "the message delivers the medium," I haven't seemed to peel away the former from consideration. My intended sense, rather, is that the medium discloses its work in the execution as well as transmission of text.

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Parallel to this assumption of “apparatus reading” in the time-based screen image, my mode of getting closer, layer by layer, in a time-release stylistics of literary reading is, finally, less constitutive than performative, less ontological than operational. The goal of such demonstration: to show not that a particular effect on a certain page is only just words after all, but rather that only words, and only these words, can *do* just this.

CY: Just to put a cap on this interview, and give a few pointers to the wider audience: What are the five scholarly classics that you consider to be essential for the kind of work you do?

GS: Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, Geoffrey Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*, Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, and Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.

CY: Other than your own scholarship, where do you see them best reincarnated and reinvented in recent publications?

GS: Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*, Herbert F. Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, Edward Allen, *Modernist Invention: Media Technology and American Poetry*, and Marjorie Perloff, *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics*.

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