Live Free or Describe:
The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form

Let’s begin in medias res!
—Lukács

Only others can answer. Beginning with you.
—Derrida

In Lieu of a Preface

Virtually all of our work passes through a welter of contexts and locations before it finds its way into what we unthinkingly call its “final form.” We “read” our work in various settings, for example, which is really a perverse way of saying that it is “read” in various settings—not by the author who speaks it aloud, but by the audiences who hear it, question it, applaud it (we hope), and may either adopt, reject, or make of it something entirely other than we had anticipated: who read it. In fact, it would perhaps be more honest to say that these readers will always and everywhere make of it something that cannot be fully anticipated or guaranteed in advance and that the “final form” of any given paper, essay, or argument inevitably bears the traces of the many readings the work undergoes before it sees print: readings’ remains.

That this process is far from mechanical or entirely predictable is evident in its strange temporality because, of course, the readings I invoke are in motion well before one has ever begun to “read a paper” in the sense of delivering it to an audience (or sending it to an editorial board). Already (always already), the writing itself, the script, is marked
by our anticipations of readings to come, of audiences, of resistances and displacements: we write into those earliest drafts our imagination of those future readings, and our anticipatory reading of the readings that we project inevitably alters any notion we might have of its origins or ends. Finally—and I am sure that every reader anticipates this last word as it appears on the horizon—we all know that “final form” is an almost ludicrous misnomer. The finality of print is virtual, as theorists and champions of reading and readers have insisted for many, many years. (This virtuality is not an artifact of new media, though they of course work their changes upon it.) The unanticipatable work of readers goes on weaving even the most rigorous, stark, and adamant assertions into new and never to be final forms: reading remains.

I haven’t taken the time to underscore this familiar process simply because portions of this essay have been read—in both senses of the term, that is, heard and questioned, interpreted and reworked (and edited)—in various settings. Rather, I want to contextualize my decision to leave standing the opening passages of the essay, which retain vivid traces of its last presentation (but one): as a talk at a graduate student colloquium titled “How We Do What We Do: Methodology in the 21st Century.” These are traces of an occasion—and its anticipation—that might have been folded silently into the written text, integrated in a smoother fashion, less boldfaced. But the particular way in which the recontextualizing power of the “how,” the “we,” the “what,” and even the “21st century” reanimate the topos of reading yet again, and the sediment that remains of that encounter—including my anticipation of it—seems useful both thematically and in the service of the theoretical effort to grapple with the new thinking about reading, on reading, around reading that is currently at large in literary studies and the humanities more broadly.¹

And so I have retained the introductory passages I composed for that occasional presentation.²

As I argue below, the notion of the regional embodied in the title “live free or describe” returns us to the figure of terrain that is so critical to Louis Althusser’s work and to his insistence that the horizon of possibility that he names the “problematic” should never be confused with individual vision, progress, innocence, sheer freedom, or merely personal failure. The terrain established by the problematic delineates its field of vision, and it inevitably presses upon every effort to read. The practice of the reader (always also a writer for Althusser) is caught up in contingencies she can neither anticipate nor wish/will away; unwittingly engaging a terrain that
she never fully controls, her most reliably unreliable companion must be
the reading effect Althusser calls “surprise” (“From Capital” 45).

Where Is the Now? Or,
How Will We Know It When We See It?

What political economy does not see is
not a pre-existing object which it could
have seen but did not see—but an object
which it produced itself in its operation
of knowledge and which did not pre-
exist it: precisely the production itself,
which is identical with the object. What
political economy does not see is what
it does: its production of a new answer
without a question, and simultaneously
the production of a new latent question
contained by default in this new answer.
Through the lacunary terms of its new
answer political economy produced
a new question, but “unwittingly.” It
made “a complete change in the terms
of the” original “problem,” and thereby
produced a new problem, but without
knowing it. Far from knowing it, it
remained convinced that it was still on
the terrain of the old problem, whereas
it has “unwittingly changed terrain.”
Its blindness and its “oversight” lie in
this misunderstanding, between what it
produces and what it sees, in this “sub-
stitution,” which Marx elsewhere calls
a “play on words” (Wortspiel) that is
necessarily impenetrable for its author.
—Althusser

“Live free or describe” is a regionalism, a regional play on
words (or a kind of pun). That is to say, formally speaking, it is the kind
of joke that may not travel at all well beyond a certain region—in this case,
beyond the borders of New England. Indeed, it may not even be recogniz-
able as a malapropism to residents new to this part of the country. Recent
arrivals may be unaware that the official motto of the state of New Hamp-
shire, which her neighbors know well because it appears on the state’s
license plates, is “Live Free or Die.” South of, say, Stamford, Connecticut,
this fact could be considered esoteric knowledge. As a result, a joke that has
the accessibility and corniness characteristic of much word play built on
common but local knowledge could fall entirely flat or, worse yet, require
an explanation, the kind of critical elaboration that, as we all know, is the
dead of wit, perhaps of all aesthetic and intellectual pleasure.

My title intends in part to capture a striking emphasis in the
recent special issue of Representations titled The Way We Read Now. Two
of the issue’s four editors, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, preface the
volume with “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” an essay that both situ-
ates the contents of the issue and seeks to map the new field of “surface
reading” in a fairly expansive way. Best and Marcus’s “self-assessment”
or “survey” of the way in which, when it comes to reading, we “now do
things a bit differently than they did back then” (2) is remarkably inclusive
of diverse critical trends (including the history of the book, cognitive reading, new formalism, reading that accesses the paraliterary archive, and work exploiting computers as “weak interpreters but potent describers, anatomizers, taxonomists” [17]). But their account of the “now,” insofar as it represents a significant break with what they figure as the “then” of a hegemonic symptomatic reading, rests primarily on its privileging of the practice of accurate “critical description,” which we might call the signature style of surface reading, on the one hand, and its evaluation of the possibility—or the impossibility, as it turns out—of freedom, on the other. I will turn below to this relation between something defined as “description” and something defined as “freedom” and its effects as a matrix for thinking about the meaning of reading and writing in literary and cultural studies. “Surface Reading” and Althusser and Balibar’s Reading Capital will serve as my proof texts. In the end, I will argue that “description” simply doesn’t work in the way the Representations editors—and perhaps many others—wish it would. As a result, the virtues they attach to “surface” readings that practice accurate critical description, reporting what the text says in its own words and eschewing a masterful rewriting of the text in terms of their own theories or particular “metalanguages” (11) —the virtues of truth, validity, objectivity (17), and critical as well as political modesty—are not available, at least not by the route they propose.

Indeed, I will ultimately argue that description as a mode of reading doesn’t work at all and that, one might say, it is precisely because of the failures of description that we have something called “the problem of method” in literary studies. These failures of description force us to think about what it means to read, which is the question that literary theory in its attention to method addresses. Best and Marcus make this point at the outset of their piece when they write that they have been “trained” in a way that “delimits what we mean and don’t mean by the term ‘read’” (1). “Surface Reading” in effect advocates a kind of retraining away from the practice it designates as symptomatic reading, though Best and Marcus “find it hard” (1) insofar as it seems to them to involve “let[ting] go of the belief that texts and their readers have an unconscious” (1) and the loss of the “power [symptomatic reading] gave to the act of interpreting” (1). I suggest that once we begin to think about reading in any mode, that is, once we return to Althusser’s question in Reading Capital, “[W]hat is it to read?” (15), we confront the power that inevitably resides there. From an Althusserian perspective, to replace the metaphor of depth by the metaphor of surface, even a surface that strains to confound its ineluctable
binarism and embody the geometrical sense of “length and breadth but no thickness” (9), is to reinscribe the myth of “reading at first sight,” a myth that these two apparently opposed modes of reading share, the myth the Althusserian account of symptomatic reading undoes.

Freedom is the second powerful term that rather unexpectedly emerges as crucial to “Surface Reading.” Best and Marcus identify a fantasy of freedom, specifically of a “heroic” freedom, as a symptom of symptomatic readings or, more to the point, readers. The critical advantages of surface or descriptive reading flow in part from “relinquishing the freedom dream that accompanies the work of demystification” (17), where demystification is the stylistic signature of symptomatic readers. While I initially found this emphasis on freedom puzzling, I have been persuaded that critical accounts of reading often connect freedom and form, although again not quite in the fashion “Surface Reading” proposes. By way of contrast, I will argue that symptomatic reading implies a kind of unfreedom, an imposition, the trace of a force never entirely in the control of either reader or writer, a reading effect not as easily disputed or eluded as content, with its thematic obviousness, may be. Description as the problematic of surface reading celebrates obviousness, that which (allegedly) lies in plain view; it consequently embraces (the form of) paraphrase. Paraphrase is precisely a reading practice that disavows reading’s own formal activities, which are thus rendered transparent in the sense of “neutral” (16), allowing a paradoxical mediation without (the complicating factor of) mediators. This newly chastened dream powers the “less glamorous” (17) but somehow more mature “political realism” (15) of surface reading. It dreams itself free of the distorting presuppositions (“theories” [8]) and foreign forms (“metalanguage” [11]) that inevitably intervene between the reader and the text and thus of the conflicts that emerge when description is defined as always already a matter of interpretation. (Althusser, as we shall see, calls such dreams the “illusion of immediate reading” or “fetishism” [“From Capital” 17], which he characterizes as the naturalizing strategy of ideology as such.) Both old and new formalism block this move to paraphrase, at the level of both its interpretation of texts and its interpretation of interpretation—that is, at the level of its theoretical reflection.6

But before pursuing these arguments, I want to linger with the question of the regional or, more specifically, the relation between the particular and the general, the local and the global, and readings and theories of reading. I stress the regionalism of my title because I discovered—in
retrospect—the degree to which the regional play on words captures the problem of how particular meanings, readings of particular texts, and practical criticism are articulated as literary—that is to say, how they are methodologically generalized; the concept of the regional embodies the problem of method in literary and cultural studies.

One inscription the notion of the regional takes in our intellectual protocols is the passage in an essay where the author pauses to place her piece in relation to a larger work in progress, to locate her argument’s regional significance, and to give an overview of that larger context before returning to the matter immediately to hand. I leave that gesture to the last pages of this essay. What seems more salient to me is the way in which the repeated resituating of my initial arguments in the context of new scenes—of public address at a symposium or for publication here, but also in local contexts that were entirely contingent—transformed and reoriented them, dislocated them, willy-nilly, well before I could begin to claim the task of conscious rethinking or rereading. To use Althusser’s language, even the most modest “change in terrain” (“From *Capital*” 24–25), embodied, for example, in the rubric “How We Do What We Do,” had immediate critical effects, instituting “a distance and an internal dislocation” (17), a reading effect that can only be said to have imposed itself on my critical practice. These microtransformations of the terrain were not authored, but rather engaged (Althusser again), enacted “unwittingly.” They can only be belatedly read.7

How? And from where? “Live free or describe” is a regional play on words insofar as it will only make sense to a certain group of people, to insiders. But the particularity at work here is not a matter of a local essence, recontextualized as it appears in new spaces, in effect pluralized but retaining an identitarian core. The stronger sense of terrain, as it emerges in Althusser’s work on reading, requires that we “conceive the historical relation between a result and its conditions of existence as a relation of production, and not of expression, and therefore as what [...] we can call the necessity of [the] contingency” of the particular (45), of the so-called “inside” and its radical dependence on reading as a practice. *The Way We Read Now* and “How We Do What We Do: Methodology in the 21st Century” both raise historical questions of identification and positionality or the question of “who are we now?” in a manner that underscores the weaving of timing and place into identifications and deidentifications: our account of the present rests on our view of the “we,” and who counts as “we” is an effect of the temporal frame we adopt.8
This persistent problem of the “we” is obviously very much alive in literary studies, the humanities, and the university at large. Dipesh Chakrabarty draws our attention to the difficulty of efforts to “figure out the now” (458) and the politics appropriate to the present, especially across a new global terrain. He warns against an unthinking “tendency to understand the present as a guide to the future” (458) and to presume “that both the now and the political are easily divined” (460). Both impulses tend to affirm political and intellectual domains that already have purchase, at least in particular locations, which can in turn prevent us from recognizing objects and critical possibilities that are *at present* unthinkable when they (inevitably) arise (462) and reposition the givens of our work.

Working at the problems of reading and form in the wake of the question of “how we do what we do” left me particularly sensitive to its omnipresence, inundated with examples of the constant redrawing of these distinctions in a process that cannot be accounted for in terms of a particular “location” on an already established grid.9 As I anticipated speaking about reading in “Surface Reading” and *The Way We Read Now* on the terrain of “How We Do What We Do: Methodology in the 21st Century,” that anticipation itself generated critical effects across a wide field of other contexts, from the seemingly trivial and wholly accidental to the pointedly substantive. Everywhere I went, I encountered discourses articulated with the critical terms of this topic: the we, the how, the doing, the method, the future. Not every instance is equally illuminating, but their proliferation is consequential. Such quotidian incidents embody the “unfreedom” that accompanies the “unwitting change in the terrain” effected by my attention to the question of how we should think the work of literary critical method in contexts—the twenty-first century, for example—not entirely of its own making.10

Consider the following instances, which range from the simplest questions of how we “format” our work, which is to say, from its rhetoric, to the problem of disciplinary specificity, to the valorization of theory as a generalizable reading effect, a reading that will not stay in its place. The twenty-first century announces the problem of technology. At a seminar celebrating the dedication of the Feminist Theory Papers archive at the Pembroke Center at Brown, halfway through a presentation by historian Dorothy Ko that was accompanied by beautiful PowerPoint images of Chinese books, I realized that speaking sans PowerPoint (as I have ever done) at the upcoming colloquium might definitively signal that I belong to a twentieth-century “we” that has yet to accept the priority of the visual over
the rhetorical. This was troubling, but before I could act on my desire not to appear very much not in the “now” and construct a visual aid adequate to the question “[W]hat is it to read?” I attended a symposium on Foucault. There, Mark Hansen, of the Duke Literature Program and the departments of information studies and visual studies (twenty-first century), rose to give the final paper of the day and remarked what a pleasure it was to participate in an event with half a dozen talks and not one PowerPoint presentation among them. For Hansen, this occurrence was liberating, a break from a norm that had already begun to feel constraining or predictable.

With figures of regions and time passing in mind, I attended a seminar at the Watson Institute for International Studies. Although I have worked for my entire life in some mode of “area studies,” including women’s studies and cultural studies, I was completely at sea in the ensuing conversation on area studies, except for one stark moment, when it suddenly appeared that everyone in the room was in fact talking about the problem of literary method. The subject of the seminar paper was the relation between area studies (defined as the study of specific regions of the globe, Latin American studies, Middle Eastern studies, East European studies) and the disciplines. The areas were understood as content and context: local knowledge, fluency in the relevant languages, historical specificity; the disciplines meant theory: conceptually driven research, explicit methodological commitments, thin data. This is the problem of the specific and the general as it appears to social scientists with whose work I would say my own has virtually nothing in common except for the persistence of this urgent issue. How do we generalize our local knowledge or practices? What is the “natural” domain of our work, and how does it travel, and (of course) who are “we”? Or, more precisely, whom does this practice make us? In one register, the opposition of the local or contextual to the theoretical or methodological is a false opposition: it is certainly a cliché to insist that we are always simultaneously both particular and general. But in another register, one we encounter when we negotiate across disciplines or historical or generic fields or from within the disciplinary to an “outside world” (including the outside enfolded within the university, the classroom) or when we ask the question of method, we face an unavoidable translation; and because the “we” embodies differentiation and distinction, the question of method involves generalization as an articulation of difference.

This brings me to my last example, a blurb appearing on the front dust jacket flap of a new book by Lloyd Pratt. Pratt is an Americanist,
his book, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. The author of the blurb, Trish Loughran, praises Pratt’s work in these terms: “*Archives of American Time* does something only a few special books have been able to do quite so well in recent years: it makes nineteenth-century American literature relevant to some of the most important arguments being made right now by scholars in other areas—arguments about temporality and spatial scale, print, postcoloniality, and global literary culture.” This sentence captures the dilemma of how we do what we do, how we read now. (“We” here means literary scholars with deep expertise in specific periods and regions and an interest in important arguments that inhabit many fields.) We work as Americanists, even as early Americanists or nineteenth-century Americanists. Yet we are “special” insofar as we are “relevant” at another level of discourse, where we address scholars from “other areas” (even other disciplines) and make arguments about “temporality and spatial scale, print, postcoloniality, and global literary culture.” These are arguments about theory and method, arguments where the power of local description meets its limits or, alternatively, where it really takes off.

In “The History of Literary Criticism,” Catherine Gallagher writes: “Younger scholars seem more interested in carrying out research programs than in debating theories. [. . .] The nineties, one might say, resemble the fifties in that new kinds of ‘practical criticism’ are once again gaining ground after a period of intense debate and reorganization” (150–51). Practical criticism, for the purposes of this very persuasive formulation, is regional: period specific, regionally delimited, attached to some form of canon, fluent in the local languages. The period concept is one of the methodological assumptions of traditional literary studies that survives intact into the twenty-first century. Working within a regional research program, one might, for a time, bracket theoretical debates as such and count upon the shared local knowledge of one’s fellow researchers to manage any gaps in the understanding of appropriate methodological protocols; the content of the work provides an enabling, even reassuring, continuity.

But a period of debate and reorganization is upon us again. It is signaled in the praise for Pratt’s *Archives of American Time*. “Surface Reading,” far from simply describing or surveying (2) the way we read now, is itself both a symptom and a polemic—though in the main a very polite one—addressing the unsettled and unsettling state of literary studies. (I should emphasize, polemic is not to my mind something to shun or
“Surface Reading” proposes descriptive reading as superior to the way we read, then, and it understandably seeks to take the field, which is plainly in transition, if not simply up for grabs. There are many other such signs of the shifting terrain, of an inchoate “now” that we are trying not so much to recognize as to piece together, to constitute. The disparate discussions taking place under the rubric of the new formalism signal renewed instability about method and theoretical grounds and distinctions. Even the renewed interest in teaching speaks to this uncertainty; the MLA has recently sponsored sessions on the topic “Why teach literature anyway?”—a practice I suspect is not common at other professional meetings. Teaching instantiates the problem of method. Methodological questions are questions of terrain, not just protocol: any classroom of students represents a test of the limits of “how we do what we do.” Given that only a small minority of them will ever be (or were ever) as interested in our particular topics (medieval mystery plays, free indirect discourse in Emma, cyberpunk) as we are, the way in which how we do what we do engages them figures our reach, the particular way in which what we do is situated and yet in motion, responsive to a constantly engaging set of unanticipated shifts. Students figure the very possibility that our regional practices might move onto a general terrain.

On Not Reading in Detail

But as there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.
—Althusser

All of these contingent moments of reorientation, dislocation, and redescription that reshaped the terrain of my argument (my reading and its objects) by drawing it beyond its original site or putting into question its reach lead me back to “Surface Reading.” The moment has come to describe the essay, in the full knowledge that there is nothing at all simple about that task: indeed, from my point of view, it is literally impossible.

The text is in some ways a peculiar document. It is perhaps of two minds—or more—about the way we read now. Indeed, just a few pages in, Best and Marcus speak of “the ways we read now” as an alternative view, only to turn back again on the grounds that the essays collected in the special issue do share “key points” and “demonstrate significant overlap” (3). I would argue that the essays collected in the issue are quite
heterogeneous, but I won’t focus here on the passages devoted to knitting them together. My “description” is thus already marked by a significant exclusion, perhaps even failing the text of a properly modest depiction.\textsuperscript{15} The more compelling element of “Surface Reading” is the effort Best and Marcus make to think a form of reading so attenuated as to barely infringe upon the autonomy and self-mediation of the literary text, indeed, one that claims to let the text tell us what it means. Promoting a descriptive or surface reading that abandons the ideologies of disclosure and unveiling, they adopt a posture they value for its “minimal critical agency” (17).

In defining this descriptive surface reading, the introduction presents itself as a description of current reading practices: Best and Marcus review “symptomatic reading” (then) (3–6), “symptomatic reading now” (6–9), and “surface reading” (9–13) in a mode they may well intend to be neutral. But their description is very much an argument for a way of reading, or two or three ways of reading.\textsuperscript{14} Generically, I have already called the result a polemic. But with only one or two exceptions, Best and Marcus do not simply dismiss the modes of reading they oppose; they recognize the plurality of reading (2), perhaps in part to acknowledge the various work their contributors do. What emerges is not a monolithic view; Best and Marcus present a number of practices as descriptive or surface reading, some more persuasively than others, and the critique of symptomatic reading(s) proceeds in a carefully modulated idiom. A certain temperance—favoring “neutrality” (18), a suspension of judgment (18), and “less resisting, masterful readers” (6)—is among the explicit values of surface reading. Best and Marcus do not even detect the demise of symptomatic reading in the collection: “These essays represent neither a polemic against nor a postmortem of symptomatic reading” (5). Nonetheless, symptomatic reading is the main target of their critique: explicitly seeking mastery, it is strenuously polemical, favors “suspicious and aggressive attacks” (11), and contemiously dismisses what texts tell us about themselves. These faults are sharply critiqued; by contrast, they help define the differences a descriptive reading practice claims to make.

Not merely a description of the way we read now, “Surface Reading” advocates an interpretative mode that would depart from a certain skeptical or suspicious reading practice that has become business as usual. “Broadly speaking” (5), as Best and Marcus say, the account they give of the model that “came to be known as symptomatic reading” (5) and the countermovement they characterize as the “way we read now” is strongest
in disclosing the ambitions and tropes of symptomatic analysis and most open to question when it elaborates the positive force of surface reading.\textsuperscript{15} In the most general sense, Best and Marcus seem to take the argument that “immediacy is derived” (Derrida, \textit{Grammatology} 157), which critiques the ideology of the transparency of the “given” and insists on the “opacity of the immediate” (Althusser, “From \textit{Capital}” 16), for a politically motivated and perhaps even phallic aggressivity or contempt for the language (and insights) of texts. They figure their defense of the text from such attacks in the tropes of the surface, attentiveness, and modesty, and description emerges as the essential moment in their method.

The polemic of “Surface Reading,” then, is not composed in the idioms of cognitive reading or the archive and the “forgotten canon,” to name two examples from the assembled essays. The cutting edge of Best and Marcus’s intervention concerns the status of description and its relation to critical freedom. Surface reading, they tell us, is a matter of saying what one sees: “to register what the text itself is saying” (8). What one sees is not in a significant way a matter of what one looks for, where one stands, what one expects to see or desires, but a reflex—an epiphenomenon, really—of what the text itself wants you to see: “[W]e take surface to mean what is \textit{evident, perceptible, apprehensible} [my emphasis] in texts. What is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is \textit{what insists on being looked} [my emphasis to here] \textit{at} rather than what we must train ourselves to see \textit{through}” (9). That any such perception of what “insists” in a text itself results from “training” of some sort or another, rather than from an undefined demand made by the text and uncannily addressed to its reader, is not a possibility that is entertained and therefore not one that is refuted. (Althusser calls this the “obviousness” of ideology.) Later, in the course of enumerating the “types,” old and new, of surface reading, Best and Marcus extend the definition of surface reading as “a \textit{practice of critical description}. This focus assumes that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves; what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is already present in them. Description sees no need to translate the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage in order to make the text meaningful. The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself” (11). “Critical description” is vividly instantiated for Best and Marcus in Christopher Nealon’s essay, which they paraphrase as arguing that “the left-leaning literary critic thus need not add theory to the text
or gather texts that exemplify his theories; it is enough simply to register what the text itself is saying” (8).

It is very easy—and Best and Marcus are certainly aware of this—to put these assertions into question. The claim that one, anyone, however “modest” her critical ambitions or unclouded her vision, can describe a text by some means that evades any element of “mediation,” “translation,” or “metalanguage”—that is, avoiding the problem of representation tout court—has been thoroughly debunked, not least by our ordinary (which is not to say simple) experiences of reading. The historical refusal of texts to be straight with us—to say the same thing to each of us or even to one of us each time we meet—has compelled the recognition that we can only ever hope to coax them into revelations by being as explicit as possible about what we are looking for—why we read now—and keeping track of how that transaction plays out, that is, by saying what reading we are guilty of. (We will inevitably fail to make a complete rendering.) This view, of course, does not entail the claim that texts do not mediate themselves or that they lack “form, structure, meaning,” “theoretical [and] historical metalanguage,” or politics. It merely acknowledges that our “reading” is always also a writing that is imperfectly mediating itself and that we must negotiate the discontinuity, the failure of coincidence between these two mediating languages, in any imaginable “description.” Reading in this sense is, as Althusser notes, a “substitution,” a “‘play on words’ (Wortspiel) that is necessarily impenetrable for its author” (“From Capital” 24). To “register what the text itself is saying,” to make present what is “already present,” is a productive act entailed by the ineluctable change of terrain. The representation of “critical description” in “Surface Reading” is neither a description of the way we read now nor a description of the way anyone might read, ever.

The unqualified reassertion of the givenness of what the text is allegedly saying about itself in “Surface Reading” is itself puzzling. Indeed, that what the text is “saying about itself” (assuming such a saying exists) would be more visible on its surface than at some depth—why should every text eschew the possibility of a double game?—is a point that isn’t argued. (There’s no logical necessity there. Is the metaphorical depth of a text a foreign country, where another language is spoken, not the text’s own?) But the strangest thing about these assertions is that they stand curiously isolated; Best and Marcus make no effort to counter the countless critiques of interpretations from our critical histories that assumed this seemingly modest pose until their (admittedly unavoidable) critical investments
were exposed by new readers. Underwriting the absence of polemic in “Surface Reading” is a strange silence concerning standard critiques of the “neutrality” of observation, critiques that are not all assimilable to a hermeneutics of relentless textual suspicion and attack.

There is no position more potent, no interpretative stance more powerful, than one that claims merely to “indicate what the text says about itself” (Best and Marcus 11), in effect, not to be interpreting at all. The claim this critical stance makes to modesty is itself the strategy by which the imagined reader accrues to herself all the authority of what the text is said to reveal in its own voice for its own purposes alone. But the critique that has debunked the posture of neutrality is so well known that I am not going to belabor it here. I think it is more revealing—and in a modestly perverse way, more in keeping with the notion of description that Best and Marcus align with surface reading—to look at an instance of description offered in “Surface Reading.” How does this text practice its privileged method?

Three theoretically significant moments of textual description appear in the introduction to embody the critique of “symptomatic reading” as a mode that ventures claims about the hidden, depths, recesses, and the unconscious (1). Symptomatic reading emerges from these accounts like a twenty-first-century lecture without PowerPoint; it is the way things were. Two of these three descriptions I will not unpack here. The first is so not twenty-first century that its nineteenth-century roots are exposed—in Marx, in Freud, in Nietzsche; this is the practice Paul Ricoeur dubs the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” The third is the paradigm of The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson’s powerful intervention on behalf of a complex historical hermeneutics. Jameson’s critical impact appears in some way to be the privileged object of The Way We Read Now taken as a whole, but the place of his work in relation to the collection is too variegated to engage today.16 Let me just indicate that it is only in relation to Jameson’s work that the introduction’s tone of rhetorical equanimity seems to slip a bit. He is said to have “argued that only weak, descriptive, empirical, ideologically complicit readers attend to the surface of the text” (5); The Political Unconscious undoubtedly assumes ideological conflict is permanently at play in the literature of capitalism and in its criticism, but “weak” doesn’t really read as Jamesonian critique any more than the flat rejection of the empirical does.17

My focus is on the second description that mediates between these two poles, that of Althusser’s lead essay in Reading Capital. Lest
there be any doubt about my own immodest aims: I have chosen this
description because I think that it is the most symptomatic of the short-
comings of “description” as a metaphor for reading. The description of
Althusser that Best and Marcus offer is the most revealing of their many
descriptions because of the remarkable translation they present of his text,
a translation that obscures the specificity of his theorization of symptom-
atic reading. This passage fails as description, even as it may succeed as
a highly interested and interesting reading.

Best and Marcus champion surface reading in the service of
“undistorted, complete” (18) accounts of texts. But their description of
symptomatic reading in Althusser’s work does not—even on the most
generous account—describe his intervention in either a complete or undis-
torted way. The difficulty they have describing the theory of reading whose
protocols they hope to replace with surface reading is particularly prob-
lematic in light of the protocols they advance. I should add—though this
draws me deeper into the very logic of description that I ultimately mean
to put into question—that when I say their description fails to describe, I do
not mean that elements of Althusser’s argument are presented in an unfair
or distorted way, skewed to fit a preexisting set of claims, as the surface
reading critique suggests is common in analyses that do not commit them-
selves to the “attentive” and modest descriptive mode of surface reading.
I mean that the pivotal terms in his theorization of lecture symptomale
make no appearance whatsoever. They have been deep-sixed.

The Althusser discussion is not at all extended. The introduc-
tion understandably devotes the lion’s share of its space to summaries of
the contributors’ essays. I am not in any case suggesting that this account—
or that of Freud or Jameson, for that matter—ought to have been longer or
fuller on the assumption that more description is inherently superior. Size
doesn’t matter here because description can never be literal and thereby
undistorted; it can never be either complete or completely disinterested.18
But it seems fair to ask that an argument seeking to persuade us to take
“description” as the test of reading itself offer exemplary descriptions of
other texts: at a minimum, it ought to demonstrate in its own practice that
such a description is possible.

In this context, where the question of critical “attentiveness”
(15) to the language of the text is so central, it is particularly odd that
Althusserian concepts have been misplaced that could be very useful to
Best and Marcus in terms of reorienting our contemporary practice of
reading away from the modes of ideology critique that have, indeed, as
they suggest, worn their critical edge down to an appalling dullness.\textsuperscript{19} Given that Althusser’s account of reading is not collapsed into other views of the symptomatic (notably Jameson’s), the elisions of the description seem inexplicable. The description of Althusser’s intervention is flawed in precisely the terms “Surface Reading” itself most privileges, and it elides the moments in his text that trouble the general theory Best and Marcus present of symptomatic reading.

How do Best and Marcus describe Althusser’s inscription of the symptom? They note that his source is Marx: “Althusser unfolded a method of symptomatic reading that he found in Marx and used to read Marx, one that ‘divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first’” (5). This marked textual intimacy between Marx and his symptomatic reader muddles one of the fundamental oppositions distinguishing surface readings (Sontag and Sedgwick, for example), that between a posture “of receptiveness and fidelity to the text’s surface” and “suspicious and aggressive attacks on its concealed depths” (10–11), but Best and Marcus pass over this in silence. They correctly observe that Althusser sees these “undivulged event[s]” as “lacunae” and that he argues that they should more precisely be understood as “questions,” specifically, unasked questions that the texts paradoxically answer. Best and Marcus gloss these unasked questions as “absent causes” (though they seem to be thinking here more of Jameson than of Althusser’s own account of the absent cause) but neglect the way in which Althusser insists that the absent question is not simply excluded (outside the text), but an invisible “defined by the visible as its invisible, its forbidden vision” (Althusser, “From Capital” 26).\textsuperscript{20} They do report what the text tells us “in its own voice”—remember that they urge us to read by recounting what the text tells us about itself—but they oddly discount that voice in this case.

\textit{Althusser dismissed “the religious phantasm of epiphanic transparency” (35), the theory of reading as one of logos, in which each part immediately expresses the whole and there is no split between manifest and latent meaning. Although Althusser equated religious reading with instantaneous transparency, his theory actually harkens back to the Gnostic concept of truth as too complex to describe, because he defined history as what could not be read in manifest discourse, as “the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures” (17). (5)
This passage is marked by some startling opacities: what defines this history suddenly erupting into the last sentence? What radical sense does Althusser attach to “inaudible” and “illegible”? But the gloss is not merely fragmentary or truncated, or even dismissive of what is “perceptible” in the text; what is most surprising is that it leaves wholly undescribed the most characteristic elements of Althusser’s account of symptomatic reading. Indeed, it passes over in silence those very elements most relevant to the way we read now.

I Am Interested in the Play on Words Itself

*It is the classical text itself which tells us that it is silent: its silence is its own words.*

—Althusser

A literary work has a historical context, as we call it, but no more nor less than any document or artifact produced in the past; but the work, if it is still read and studied when this “context” will have subsided into archival compost, has a relation as well to a future, by which it remains always to some extent incomprehensible by any given present. This is the dimension of the work’s *historicality*, which is therefore not to be simply confused or conflated with historical “context.”

—Kamuf

The following are the signature elements of Althusser’s account, missing from the description “Surface Reading” presents, that speak most directly to the contrast between symptomatic and descriptive reading that is key to the narrative Best and Marcus compose.

- Althusser’s assertion that reading is a “guilty” process (“From *Capital*”); “innocent” reading—whether of the party of the religious myth (surface) or the empiricist myth (depth)—misrepresents what reading *does*. This is a claim about reading, not the read or the reader.
- His unforgiving critique of the empiricist myth of reading in which truth is a “kernel” “hidden” within a “husk” or beneath a “veil” (57); Althusser mocks the depth model, the very model “Surface Reading” attributes to him under the rubric of Gnosticism (which “posited truth as secret, deep and mysterious” [Best and Marcus 4]). Indeed, he *pairs it* with “the religious myth of reading” in which one imagines the world as an open book to be read at first sight: “The empiricist conception may be thought of as a variant of the conception of vision, with the mere difference that *transparency* is not given from the
beginning, but is separated from itself precisely by the veil, the dross of impurities, of the inessential which steal the essence from us” (57).

- His emphasis on production, that is, on reading and writing; reading is transitive in his view, an inevitably productive encounter. This is never a matter of uncovering a depth. His metaphor is one of “terrain,” a metaphor of the surface, but never of innocence or mere description. Althusser notes the “seductiveness” of his own spatial metaphors and interrogates (denaturalizes) them (25, 26–27).

- His invocation of the “unwitting change in terrain” in order to think the way in which reading and writing generate “surprise” (45); if reading is productive and abandons the alibi of innocent description of what is “given” before its eyes, surprise is inevitable. Althusser ties it to the “play on words,” the double meaning that appears on the surface of the text.

- Finally, his rejection of the “freedom dream” Best and Marcus associate with “heroic” symptomatic readers. In his account, symptomatic reading produces no subject effect whatsoever: rather than confirming a “constitutive subject” (27), reading traces the effects of the problematic: “[I]t is literally no longer the eye (the mind’s eye) of a subject which sees what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which sees itself in the objects or problems it defines” (25).

Foremost among these concepts is the claim that reading is “guilty” and bears the burden of its own problematic, which is to say that it is inevitably productive. Reading’s production of knowledge results from a change in terrain that is historically and politically situated, unavoidable, but not a project of unveiling. Althusser characterizes his own reading of Capital as “quite the opposite of an innocent reading. It is a guilty reading, but not one that absolves its crime on confessing it [. . .]. It is therefore a special reading which exculpates itself as a reading by posing every guilty reading the very question that unmasks its innocence, the mere question of its innocence: what is it to read?” (15).

The impossibility of innocent reading, the need to acknowledge its guilty effects, the continuity aligning the metaphors of surface and depth or vision and unveiling, and the requirement to return constantly to the question, What is it to read? precisely because reading modestly claims
again and again to be innocent—these are all arguments that fundamentally undermine the problematic of description. They expose the striking will to power at work in description, its unavoidable self-contradictions, and its political effects. These arguments ought to have demanded attention in “Surface Reading” as a matter of accurate description, but also because they propose another relation to reading, one that steps beyond the impasse of surface and depth.

Althusser’s emphasis on productivity and a guilt that cannot be avoided and must therefore be confessed brings us to the questions of freedom and form. Best and Marcus’s comments on these topics are heterogeneous. Some are motivated by a certain defensiveness, as for example when they reject the view that their approach might engender political quietism or when they concede that they are interested in challenging “a political agenda that determines in advance how we interpret texts” (16). Others are observations about political events and their representations: the torture photographs from Abu Ghraib, the “real-time” coverage of Katrina, and the way in which “many people instantly recognized as lies political statements such as ‘mission accomplished’” (2). This list is meant to show that the “demystifying protocols” of symptomatic reading are no longer of much use. But this conclusion seems to misread the very evidence cited: George W. Bush was reelected by three million votes one year after the “instantly recognizable” lie, “Mission Accomplished.” In any case, these remarks are basically situational, reflecting on social circumstances that may or may not require symptomatic reading’s “subtle ingenuity” (2) and anticipating the hostile political attacks some critics might offer of the project of surface reading. They are political in the ordinary sense of reflections on how a regional quarrel about method in literary theory might read when generalized across a wider social field.

The more theoretically substantive political commentary has to do with freedom and its relation to politics. This is hard to parse in part because freedom remains undefined. What I can tease out from the text is that Best and Marcus feel that literary studies is delusional about its political agency: in their view, “the disasters and triumphs of the last decade have shown that literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change” (2). Furthermore, they are “skeptical about the very possibility of radical freedom and dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation” (2). Given these doubts, they counsel “political realism about the revolutionary capacities of both texts and critics, and doubts about whether we could ever attain the
heightened perspicacity that would allow us to see fully beyond ideology” (15–16). Many readers will find these views uncontroverted. Althusser, symptomatic reader, makes this point about ideology in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in 1969. But they remain a crux in the text, deepening the critique of symptomatic readers and shoring up the putative contrast between them and surface readers. The “freedom dream that accompanies the work of demystification” (Best and Marcus 17) is said to ensnare symptomatic readers in its fantasies. Jameson is a key example here, but Best and Marcus also posit a kind of generic “heroic critic” whose valiant wrestling with the text (15) (or borrowing of the artwork’s already established heroism [14]) brings him glory (or reflected glory). For this reader, “freedom emerges from an agon with the ideological text” (15); in his dreams, he is boldly on the track of “radical freedom” (2).

For Best and Marcus, there are better and worse versions of this freedom dream—new formalism is worse, Adorno better—but surface reading is said to reveal that literary “objects don’t encapsulate freedom” (15); they suggest that we should abandon “the untenable claim that we are always more free than those who produce the texts we study and that our insights and methods therefore have the power to confer freedom” (18). This reification of freedom—I am unable to imagine quite what Best and Marcus are talking about here—makes it impossible to respond to this critique properly. But this impasse does not keep us from noting that abandoning untenable rescue fantasies and idealizations of art and criticism, as they urge us to do, cannot ground the chastened but accurate, truthful, and descriptive “minimal critical agency” (17) that Best and Marcus advance. Even as we happily discard the very political delusions they dismiss, we find the position they set out for us no less uninhabitable. A richer account of the reader not blinded by a freedom dream emerges from Althusser.

We can displace the implicit binary at work here: that of a symptomatic reading aligned with the dream of living free, heroic narrative, and rescue fantasies versus a surface reading, sadder but wiser in its modesty, its trust in the text and its author, and its apparent recognition of limits: pragmatic political limits, limits to freedom as such, and limits to interpretative agency, the ground of readerly heroics.

Readings Remain

I began with the regional play on words inscribed in “Live Free or Describe,” an opposition that embodies the choice proffered between
the dreams of freedom distorting symptomatic reading and the clarity of unimpeded vision that follows from description. Althusser gives considerable attention to the play on words, even as his own language is heavily marked by repetition, italics, doubling, oxymoron, citation, translation, and a kind of tongue-twisting play with negation: “[W]hat classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is what it sees; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is what it does not lack; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is what it does not miss. The oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but the sight itself” (“From Capital” 21). His theoretical interest is in word play that shifts the ground under the unwitting feet of reading and writing subjects and their objects, real, concrete, or abstract.

This insistence on the “play on words” returns us to the category of form. Perhaps more than most readers of Althusser, I take him to be a thinker of forms, though of course my description here is neither neutral nor innocent; whether he is grappling with the categories of ideology and the subject or thinking the specificity of the forms of scientificity (67), he is a theorist who recognizes that the problem of reading entails the problem of form. Form as a productive consequence of reading disrupts the distinction between description and analysis, reading and writing, inside and outside, surface and depth; it generates a disorienting doubleness of meaning on a single plane, the “substitution” that is the play on words. In line with Althusser’s effort to think the knowledge effect, the aesthetic effect, and the society effect (66), I suggest that we call the play on words that symptomatic reading engenders the reading effect.23

The problematic opened up by the reading effect that is put to work by the play on words is vast. Unpacking it fully may help us as we try to rethink what Marjorie Levinson describes as a startling elision in the work of the so-called “new formalists.” Levinson argues that “one finds in the literature (I treat the exceptions in my full text online) no efforts to retheorize art, culture, knowledge, value or even—and this is a surprise—form” (561).24 While I don’t entirely agree with her characterization, I would concede that the theorizations of the many critics working to reanimate the category of form are in the mode that Peter Galison has dubbed “specific theory.” Specific theory is “finite,” rather than universalizing or sublime; it refuses either “to lodge itself in an Archimedean point outside the world” or to “collap[e] into ethnographic news releases from a particular subdomain of culture” (585). Arriving in the wake of the High Theory we still (however self-critically) associate with names such
as Freud and Lacan, Irigaray and Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and Agamben, specific theory might have some purchase on the “critical modesty” that Best and Marcus champion. But it insists on its own play on words, the oxymoron of theory qualified by specificity, bound to the finite, yet not contained and inevitably exceeding its object. Galison insists there is a space for theory, insistently at work, disruptive and inventive, “because the horizon of criticism can have a radius that is finite” (382). Aware that every metalanguage is also a local language, itself subject to a metalinguistic resituating, specific theory calculates the degree to which it occupies a place in the now, a terrain that is relative and subject to change and anticipates the inevitable recalculation. As Galison puts it: “Specific theory is lodged in an expanded present, a present in which it is simultaneously possible to ask philosophical questions that open up empirical work and to pose critical historical questions about the categories deployed by our philosophy” (383).

Specific theory, then, leverages its regional form into theoretical insights, themselves interested, productive, and guilty, requiring translation and always in play. Elsewhere, I pursue this notion in terms of the labile, unpredictable, incessant movements of the category of form (“The Opposite of Theory”). For now, however, I will only suggest that Althusser (and Marx) sees in the play on words a specific unfreedom of a quite different sort than that invoked by the appealingly innocent descriptions celebrated in “Surface Reading.” What is cunning and powerful about the play on words in political economy and in Capital is the way in which form is situational, transitive, ultimately incomplete, as Althusser claims his reading of Capital is incomplete, indeed, no more than provisional—“but what is not provisional?” (“Letter” 324)—and nonetheless a force not to be evaded. The reader here is no faux hero, but neither is he the modest purveyor of the merely perceptible, repeating what the text confides about itself. When the terrain changes, when we move into a new region, when we rearticulate our local insights in a partial way in a context not entirely of our own making—as we must, for when do we ever enjoy the delicious freedom of a context entirely of our own making?—the form, tracking our unwitting negotiations with other scenes, shifts its shape. It cannot hold its place. Our attentiveness to the text’s own words is unfailing. But when we observe that “its silence is *its own words*” (Althusser, “From Capital” 22), we guiltily acknowledge that this silence is never merely described, but a measure of the unavoidable break that is reading’s encounter with form. And we will then find ourselves surprised by another reader we
could not anticipate and the historicality of a future that “remains always to some extent incomprehensible by any given present” (Kamuf 164). What remains is to be symptomatically read, disclosed by an interpreter as not having been fully in control of our text, of our languages, or even of what we know we meant to say.

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Notes

1 This is a large bibliography already, overlapping but not identical to work on problems in aesthetics and the reanimation of the category of form. For a beginning on this knotted conjuncture, see Felski; Fleissner “Symptomatology” and “When the Symptom”; Levinson; Loesberg; Sedgwick; Warner; Wolfson and Brown.

2 I would like to give this use of “occasional” something of the inflection Jane Gallop develops in her Anecdotal Theory.

3 The earliest drafts of this essay simply assert that “live free or describe” should be read as a pun, despite the violence that reading does to the standard definition. Two trusted readers intervened on behalf of the more rigorous definition; see also Margaret Hennefeld’s analysis of Freud’s view of puns in her unpublished manuscript “Jokes and Their Relation to Cultural Studies.”

I borrow the “Where Is the Now?” subtitle from Dipesh Chakrabarty, who takes it in turn from a comment Teresa de Lauretis contributed to a symposium called “The Future of Criticism”: “The mainspring of my resistance is the belief that the time for theory is always now” (365).

4 To my mind, none of these modes of reading (or of not reading [8]) fall unambiguously into the category of “surface reading” as it emerges in Best and Marcus; most predate a turn toward the “surface,” and all seem indifferent to the most striking of the terms Best and Marcus invoke on behalf of surface reading in its strong form.

5 The special issue of Representations has two additional editors, Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, who provide an afterword. These bookends take rather different approaches to the question of “surface” or “descriptive” reading, not the least of which is that Apter and Freedgood introduce the term literal reading but then observe that “literal reading is of course a metaphor: we cannot stick to the letters of the text, even metaphorically” (139). This impossibility of both the literal and the metaphorical leaves us in an interesting place from which to think reading. Apter and Freedgood also suggest, though in the form of a question: “Are we not perhaps ready, finally, to examine the literary history of symptomatic reading en route to discovering that the era of hypersymptomatic reading is alive, well, perdurable, and hardly excluded from new literacies or materialist reading practices?” (143). It would be a gross oversimplification to collapse the issue’s introduction and its afterword together.
See Cleanth Brooks’s insistence on the literal meaning of “the night wore on” in a quarrel with Ivor Winters: “[T]he word wore does not mean literally ‘that the night passed,’ it means literally ‘that the night wore’—whatever wore may mean, and as Winters’ own admirable analysis indicates, wore ‘means,’ whether rationally or irrationally, a great deal” (201). See also his polemic against the “heresy of paraphrase” (192–214); and Best and Marcus 10.

I have dramatically scaled down Althusser’s account of the “unwittingly changed terrain.” He cites this phrase from Capital. The change Marx detects in Adam Smith, from the value of labor to the value of labor power, like the shift Althusser detects in Marx, from a first reading of Smith’s radical omissions (“From Capital” 18) to a “second quite different reading, with nothing in common with the first” (19), are of a different order of historical and political significance than the local shifts I note. But the structure of relation—that is, the process or effect of reading—is parallel.

“Surface Reading” offers an autobiographical account of its “we” (“[a] relatively homogeneous group of scholars who received doctoral degrees in either English or comparative literature after 1985” [Best and Marcus 1]), but it clearly seeks to address a broad trend. It would be reductive to read its intervention either in simple generational terms or as a reflex of the authors’ own recent literary scholarship. See Best; and Marcus, Between Women.

“The politics of location” is a well-known trope that appears in many not entirely compatible avatars, including “cognitive mapping,” “interpretative community,” and “situatedness.” See Englestad and Gerrard; Fish; Haraway; Jameson, Postmodernism; Rich; Simpson. See also Michael Litwack’s unpublished manuscript “Feeling Out of Form: Reading the Turn to Affect in Cultural Studies” for an analysis of the critique theorists of affect offer of the overattachment of cultural studies to “positions, closed systems, a politics of location, and a grid-like notion of inter-sectionalism.”

This phenomenon of the shifting terrain is obviously not limited to the lens imposed on our work when we write essays or talks; when we teach, which combines elements of both, it also happens that the world itself suddenly seems obsessed with our project, and “real life” generously offers up materials, data, examples, or counterexamples.

See Crewe; Foucault.

My subtitle “On Not Reading in Detail” refers, of course, to Naomi Schor’s Reading in Detail.

I do regret that space doesn’t permit a remotely adequate account of the diverse essays in the collection. They take distinctly different approaches to their materials and to the problem of reading, ranging from a cognitive approach to the figure of depth in Fredric Jameson’s work (Crane) to a hermeneutics of “susceptibility” in analyzing Josephine Baker (Cheng) to a straight-up history of the book “narrated from the point of view not of human readers and users, but of the book,” that is, of the “it-narrative” (Price 120).

The phrase echoing Anthony Trollope’s The Way We Live Now is itself contested; see Nancy Armstrong’s introduction to a recent special issue of Novel devoted to and titled Theories of the Novel Now. Her editor’s introduction, “The Way We Read Now,”
addresses the same moment of instability and changing critical consensus to utterly different ends.

15 The introduction installs an odd elision in the critical history of the past twenty years, where a historicist problematic—let’s call it “old historicist” to avoid distracting side quarrels for the moment—practiced a kind of contextualism in which reading in any of its strong senses was really not the point. This work emphatically goes “outside” the text for interpretative grounding but bears little resemblance to the various hermeneutics of suspicion; it wielded great influence all the same across the critical field Best and Marcus are generalizing. See Fleissner, “Is Feminism a Historicism?” for an alternative reading of historicism.

16 The events leading to the publication of The Way We Read Now don’t allow us to assign it a single origin. They include Symptomatic Reading and Its Discontents, a seminar at the American Comparative Literature Association conference (2006), and The Way We Read Now: Symptomatic Reading and Its Aftermath, a joint conference at Columbia University and New York University (2008).

17 Best and Marcus seem to suggest in one passage that Jameson thinks the critic—or perhaps he himself?—is God: “Jameson is not only doing what E. D. Hirsch called usurping the place of the author (5); he is also more daringly associating the power of the critic with that of the God of biblical hermeneutics, who can transcend the blinkered point of view of humankind. [. . .] ‘Always historicize’ is a transhistorical imperative whose temporality matches the eternity Augustine ascribed to God. Where Augustine viewed God as the best author, Jameson sees the critic as the best author” (15). This seems shadowed by the polemical in the bad old sense.

18 The only truly adequate description would be one that repeated the text verbatim from beginning to end—a perfect copy, a map of the world as extensive as the world itself (as Borges figured it).

19 In some respects, this is a widely held view: a certain ideology critique, sometimes affiliated with the historicism of “always historicize,” very widely distributed and once effective, no longer offers much in the way of new insights, at least in relation to certain contents. For various responses, including defenses of symptomatic analysis, see Armstrong; Felski; Fleissner, “Symptomatology” and “When the Symptom”; Levinson; Rooney, “Form and Contentment”; Sedgwick.

20 The invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible (to return to the spatial metaphor), the outer darkness of exclusion—but the inner darkness of exclusion, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure. In other words, the seductive metaphors of the terrain, the horizon and hence the limits of a visible field defined by a given problematic threaten to induce a false idea of the nature of this field, if we think this field literally according to the spatial metaphor as a space limited by another space outside it. (26)

21 “I am interested in the play on words itself” comes from Althusser’s “From Capital” (40).

22 Clearly, this connection is not intuitive to everyone thinking about these questions at present; there are efforts to think
reading in neophenomenological and affective modes that are not congenial to the concept of form, even as there are theorists addressing form without any particular attention to the problem of reading. See Friedman; Rooney, “Better Read” and “Form and Contentment”; and Sprinker for efforts to bind reading and form in an Althusserian idiom.

See Felman, esp. 141–247, for her use of the phrase “reading effect” to designate a “transference effect” (50) in a very different context.

24 One of the issues that may be at stake in the new formalism—at least in some quarters—is just what counts as theorizing “now.” Levinson’s observations raise questions of a slightly different order than those that bear on the matter of surface reading, which I pursue elsewhere (“The Opposite of Theory”).

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Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form

Ellen Rooney

This article returns to the question “what is it to read?” through two texts: Louis Althusser’s *Reading Capital* (1965) and *The Way We Read Now*, a special issue of *Representations* (2009). Rooney analyzes the issue’s introduction, Sharon Marcus’s and Stephen Best’s “Surface Reading,” examining its accounts of description and “minimal critical agency” and its skepticism concerning radical freedom and the interpretative heroics of literary analysis from the point of view of Althusser’s radically different account of reading as a “guilty” practice, one marked by productivity and the contingency of “surprise.” The author argues that the surface method of “critical description,” which seeks to “indicate what a text says about itself” and to describe what it makes “evident, perceptible, apprehensible,” fails when Marcus and Best describe Althusser’s text but overlook the fact that his *lecture symptomale* sharply critiques the metaphor of depth and cautiously deploys a metaphor of terrain. This article proposes that from an Althusserian perspective, the metaphors of surface and depth as they appear in “Surface Reading” are twin brothers, two sides of a coin. Whether in the form of the religious myth of immediate, surface reading or the empiricist conception of the text as veiled truth, these approaches proclaim their critical “innocence” and disavow the metalanguages that bring the textual surface into view.