Escalated Reading: Stanford, Benjamin, Poe

György Fogarasi

Abstract: In recent decades, the controversy over distant vs. close reading has revolved around the spatiotemporal question of scaling. Participants in the debate have either advocated distance (or speed) or have insisted on proximity (or slowness). On a meta-critical level, some have even argued for the need for any reading to be able to shift between, and thus to combine, different scales. Very little has been said, however, about the limitations of scaling as such, and the irreducibility of reading to the logic of scales. Starting out from a few intricate formulations by some proponents of close and distant reading, this paper attempts to investigate the potentials and limitations of scaling, first by references to "Stanford" (the university as well as its founder), then by looking into Walter Benjamin's treatment of film, and finally, though most importantly, by re-reading some passages in Poe's detective story "The Purloined Letter." These three points of reference (Stanford, Benjamin, Poe) seem analogous in the way they lay mutual emphasis on both serialization and segmentation, fast and slow motion, or distance and proximity. On a closer (or more distant?) look, however, Poe's text goes even beyond such a scheme of scaling. It testifies to a logic of detection which surpasses mere zooming-in or zooming-out strategies, and points to a notion of reading that is "escalated" not simply because of its extraordinary range in terms of velocity or distance, but more radically because, although it still binds reading to specific scales, it also has an aspect that remains utterly heterogeneous to any logic of scaling. The paper attempts to highlight this radically "escalated" (out-of-scale) aspect of reading.

Keywords: attention, close reading, distant reading, search, scale, escalation

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Escalation is a term we tend to use in the context of traumatic historical incidents, unexpected outbursts of violence, especially when violent actions form a quickening series, a kind of widening spiral that threatens to engulf not only direct participants of a conflict, but also spectators, and threatens even to demolish existing frames of mediation and established institutions of peace. The implication is that, in such cases of extreme reactivity, normal or customary levels of action are surpassed by extraordinary ranges. That is exactly what the phrase tells us: events "e-scalate" when, either spatially or temporally, they go "out of scale," immensely out of hand, beyond ordinary control. And that is why the frequent imperative to "de-escalate" sounds like a call not only for sobriety or self-control, but also for negotiation and peace. Understood in a more rigorous, though certainly idiosyncratic sense, escalation might, however, also refer to the utter irrelevancy of scales, of any single scale, and might point to a mode of operation that is escalated in the radical sense of surpassing not only this or that customary scale, but scale as such. This paper attempts to elaborate on the latter possibility.

Close and Distant Reading

With the emergence, in recent decades, of computer assisted massive archival analysis, literary interpretation has reached unprecedented levels. The ordinary scales of reading have been far surpassed both in terms of distance and speed. Reading has, in that sense, escalated. In the wake of this development, the controversy over distant vs. close reading (or the "reading wars," as some have called it, cf. Hensley 340), has revolved around the question of scales. Most often, participants in the debate have either advocated distance (or speed), or have insisted on proximity (or slow motion). On a meta-critical level, some have even argued for the need for any reading to be able to shift between, and thus to combine, different ranges of analysis. Very little has been said, however, about the limitations of scaling as such and the irreducibility of reading to the logic of scales. Starting out from a few intricate formulations by major proponents of close and distant reading, I plan to investigate the potentials and limitations of scaling, first by references to "Stanford" (the university as well as its founder), then by looking into Walter Benjamin's treatment of film, and finally, though most importantly, by re-reading some passages in Poe's detective story "The Purloined Letter." These three points of reference (Stanford, Benjamin, Poe) seem analogous in the way they lay mutual emphasis on both serialization and segmentation, fast and slow motion, or distance and proximity. On a closer (or perhaps more distant?) look, however, Poe's text goes even beyond such a scheme of scaling. It testifies to a logic of detection which surpasses mere zooming-in or zooming-out strategies, and points to a notion of reading that is escalated not simply because of its extraordinary range in terms of velocity or distance, but more radically because of its utter heterogeneity to any logic of scaling. Reading might thus become "escalated" not only in the sense of being out of *ordinary* scale, but also in the sense of being out of *all* scale and indeed out of scale *as such* (while still remaining attached to this or that particular scale).

As part of a modern "rhetorics of scale," the method of close reading was progressively applied in primary, secondary and college education from the late nineteenth century (Jin 105 and 109), and can, in fact, be traced back to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Biblical exegesis, or even further, to certain formulations in ancient rhetorical thought (Hancher 122–124). In the wake of these rhetorical and hermeneutic traditions, the notion of close or slow textual scrutiny seems to have gained additional momentum in the romantic discourse on poetry, as the Wordsworthian warning against the "rashness of decision" in the Advertisement

to the *Lyrical Ballads* clearly testifies. The Google Books Ngram Viewer chart on the frequency of the expression "close reading" between 1800 and 2000 (as produced and presented by Michael Hancher, 127, see Figure 1) seems to support the claim of a gradual progression, but upon closer look, it also seems to show a slight steepening of the rise in frequency both after World War II and in the late 1970s, which might indicate the spread of New Criticism and deconstruction, respectively.

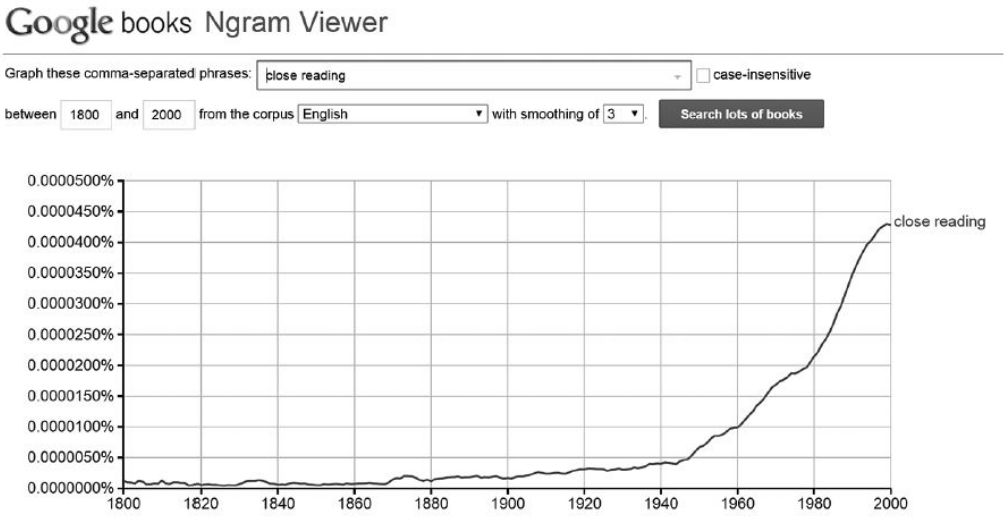

Figure 1: Google Books Ngram Viewer chart on the frequency of the expression "close reading" from 1800 to 2000 (source: Hancher 127).

So, in the end, the customary association of the phrase with these latter tendencies in literary criticism is not that mistaken. Californian artist Mark Tansey, for instance, would hardly have featured Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971) in his painting titled *Close Reading* (1990, see Figure 2), had not deconstruction made its own immense contribution to the practice of minute textual analysis in the previous decades.

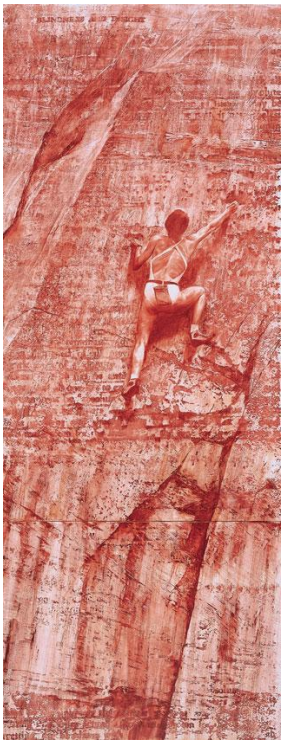

Figure 2: Mark Tansey, *Close Reading*, 1990 (source: https://composing.org/blog/close-reading/).

In Tansey's red monochrome picture, we see a free-climbing female figure as she ascends a steep cliff, the texture of which is indeed composed of textual fragments, chunks taken from page 147 of de Man's essay collection (Redfield 177). The same page figures in Tansey's *Reader* (also from 1990), representing another scene of "textual absorption" (Taylor 80), the partially blurred image of another athletic figure, also depicted from behind, amid intense motion toward, into, or with the text. Both images can be taken as studies for Tansey's vast picture of the same year, *Constructing the Grand Canyon*, one that represents not only poststructuralist or deconstructive readers like de Man and Derrida, but a whole array of different attitudes and activities in relation to the textual terrain (climbing, pushing, drilling, surveying, mining, collecting, sitting, walking, etc.). The female figure of the climbing "close reader" appears without a safety rope, boldly trying to base her reading on mere textual evidence in the form of crags and crevices to cling to or get a foothold on, while two bison overlook the whole scene negligently from the ridge above.[1]

As *Blindness and Insight* testifies, de Man was deeply indebted to the American practice of close textual analysis. He appreciated the "considerable refinement in catching the details and nuances of literary expression," as well as the emphasis on the unity of "form," and the concomitant "sense of context that is often lacking in French or in German interpretation," but he also had serious reservations concerning the organicist and ahistorical formalism propagated by the New Critics (de Man 27). On the other hand, he was just as sceptical about the achievements of contemporary German and French criticism for their lack of commitment to textual detail. That is why he so much welcomed Derridas's exemplary close reading of Rousseau (de Man 110) and later himself produced several instances of such rigorous textual analysis. Pushed to an extreme, such a reading arrives at the "the prosaic materiality of the letter" (de Man 90), which however cannot be subsumed under the rubric of an empiricist or physicalist notion of matter. As Derrida comments: "The literality of the letter situates in fact this materiality not so much because it would be a physical or sensible (aesthetic) substance, or even matter, but because it is the place of prosaic resistance […] to any organic or aesthetic totalization, to any aesthetic form" (Derrida 2001: 350).

Today, close or slow reading is still a wide-spread practice in literary studies, from rhetorical or psychoanalytic or gender criticism to postcolonial readings or various historically oriented modes of investigation. But close reading is also a method growingly under siege—this time not from the side of avuncular morality, as was the case in the early 1980s, but from the side of its own formal opponent, "distant reading," a method in computer-aided analysis. (Other related methodologies would include "algorithmic criticism" or "macroanalysis.") According to its propagator and prime practitioner Franco Moretti and his 2013 book *Distant Reading* (a collection of essays published over two decades), distant reading consists in "identifying a discrete formal trait and then following its metamorphoses through a whole series of texts" (Moretti 65). Moretti happily countersigns Jonathan Arac's definition of this method as "a formalism without close reading" (Moretti 65), while he himself occasionally prefers to call it "serial" reading or "quantitative" analysis. For Moretti, "the trouble with close reading" (2013, p. 48) is its limitedness to a (small) canon and its adherence, thus, to a secularized theology. Close scrutiny is called into question for being insensitive to patterns larger than what a human glimpse could contain. In contrast, computation-assisted archival analysis (of databases produced by a minute interpretive work of coding) makes hitherto unseen objects visible through "seriation," visualizing patterns of power and ideology no one has seen before. Through an analysis of 7,000 items, distant reading is able to show, for example, how the titles of British novels have drastically shortened during the eighteenth century (in comparison to the lengthy title of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, see Figure 3), which, for Moretti, shows the intense growth of the market.

[1] For other paintings by Tansey, related to deconstruction, see his *Bridge over the Cartesian Gap*, as well as his *Derrida Queries de Man* (both from 1990), incorporating pages 146 and 147 of *Blindness and Insight*, respectively.

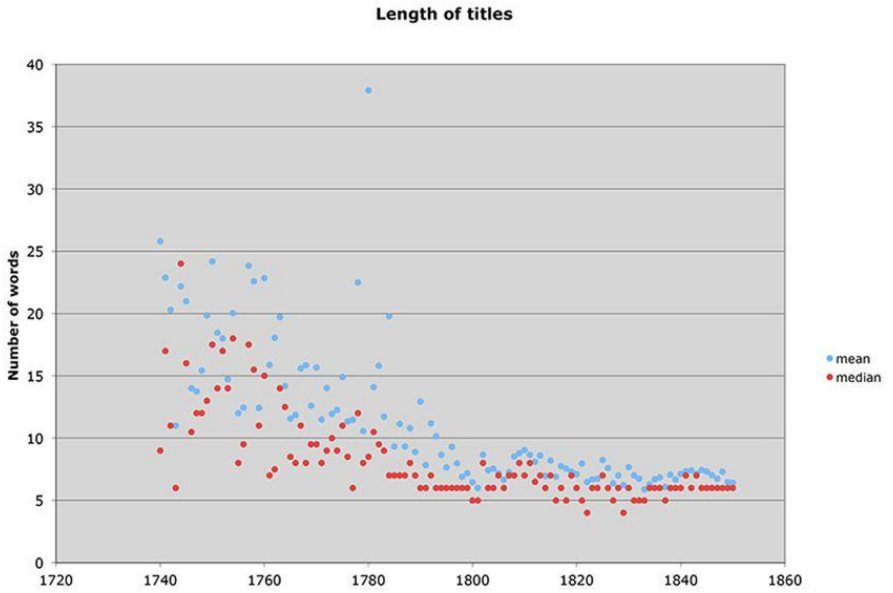

Figure 3: The shortening of the titles of British novels from 1740 to 1850 (source: Moretti 183).

THE
LIFE
AND
STRANGE SURPRIZING
ADVENTURES
OF
ROBINSON CRUSOE,
Of *YORK*, MARINER:

Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Iſland on the Coaſt of AMERICA, near the Mouth of the Great River of OROONOQUE;

Having been caſt on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men periſhed but himſelf.

WITH

An Account how he was at laſt as ſtrangely deliver'd by PYRATES.

Written by Himſelf.

LONDON:
Printed for W. TAYLOR at the *Ship* in *Pater-Noſter-Row.* MDCCXIX.

Figure 4: The original title page of Daniel Defoe's novel: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived...*, 1719 (source: British Library, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-daniel-defoes-robinson-crusoe-1719).

He also demonstrates two other ways in which titles serve as perfect ads for novels: through their growingly figurative style, which activates consumer interest, and their tricky grammatical formulas, which themselves create expectations concerning narrative content (the use of

definite or indefinite articles, or of "the x of y" structure). All this is missed if readers confine themselves to the close scrutiny of a tiny portion of works provided by the canon.

The continual emphasis on minute formal traits also means, however, that distant reading in no way attempts to do away with the method of close reading in its entirety. It rather purports to complete it by combining the scrutiny of individual textual elements with a technologically extended sensitivity to larger patterns: "we must learn to find meaning in *small* changes and *slow* processes" (Moretti 192, emphasis mine). Such combination of what is "small" with what is "slow" calls for the connection of "close" with "fast" (or "distant") modes of reading. It means the combination of "top down" zooming-in and "bottom-up" zooming-out movements (Jänicke et al. 10–11), which in this case translates into a reading that combines spatial zooming-in with temporal zooming-out movements, tracing small textual elements through long decades or centuries. And that is precisely what Moretti advocates when he urges a "quantitative study" whose "units are linguistic and rhetorical" (Moretti 204). In the case of the historical evolution of genres, such a mode of combined analysis would complete the spatial close-ups of rhetorical reading with the temporal bird's-eye views of quantitative analysis. It would attempt, in other words, to technologically miniaturize in time what has been sensually enlarged in space.

Stanford

A similar ambivalence emerges concerning Stanford (both as a university and as its founder), considered as an amalgam of distant and close modes of analysis. While Stanford University might for many of us represent distant perspective or high-speed reading, for it is home to the Literary Lab (a research center still associated with its founder Moretti, now a professor emeritus),[2] the university's 19th-century founder, businessman and politician Leland Stanford made steps in precisely the opposite direction, and had his share in the development of technologies assisting close scrutiny: slow motion, or even motion brought to a standstill. His famous commissioning of photographs of trotting or galloping horses, which resulted in the astounding photo sequences produced by Eadweard Muybridge (among them a sequence shot on June 19, 1878, on the Palo Alto racetrack, showing Stanford's own racehorse "Sallie Gardner" in a gallop at 60km/h, see Muybridge, Figure 5) played an important role in changing the way animal motion was perceived.

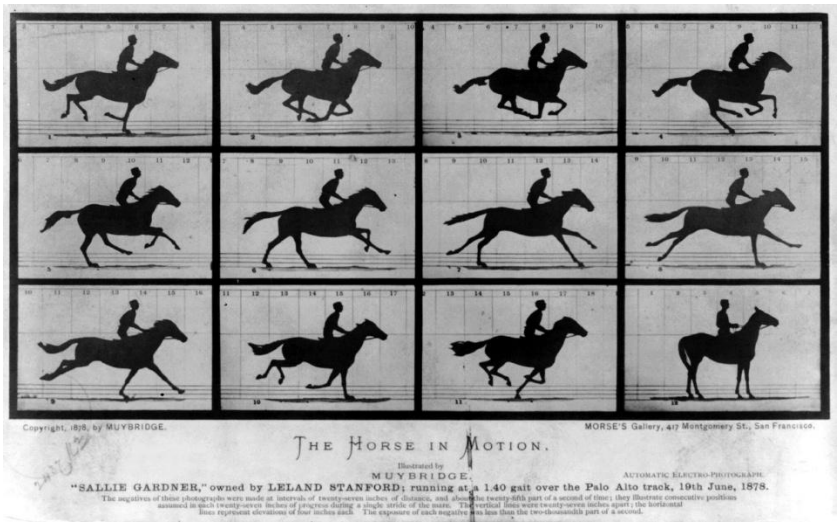

Figure 5: Eadweard Muybridge, The Horse in Motion ("Sallie Gardner," owned by Leland Stanford; running at a 1:40 gait over the Palo Alto track, 19th June 1878) (source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a45870/).

[2] Stanford Literary Lab was founded in 2010. See Moretti's articles (often co-authored) in the Lab's *Pamphlets* series (started in 2011): https://litlab.stanford.edu/pamphlets/.

Although this picture sequence presents the horse in gallop, Stanford originally commissioned these photo series in order to gain photographic evidence for his conviction that during trotting there are moments when all four legs of a horse are off the ground simultaneously. Muybridge's technological solution proved to be a lasting achievement of early action photography. To produce the pictures, he developed a sophisticated recording system of two rows of cameras, 24 of them set at 90 degree angle along the track, and another 12 set at 30 to 60 degree angle at the end), with shutters set to 1/2000th split of a second and triggered by tripwires (or later a clockwork mechanism) as the horse was dashing forward. The images thus produced allowed for the examination of the different phases of animal locomotion in their isolated frozenness and indeed provided sufficient proof for Stanford's initial hypothesis. But Muybridge also animated his sequences with the help of his own invention, the so-called "zoopraxiscope,"[3] an apparatus which did not only make still pictures move again (thereby contributing to the promotion of cinematic technology) but also made it possible to examine the movement of horses in slow motion. Muybridge's still or animated photo sequences of galloping horses also contributed to the displacement of a long tradition of painting horses during gallop. As exemplified by the works of George Stubbs (his painting of *Baronet*, 1791, for instance, see Figure 6), or by Johann Erdmann Gottlieb Prestel's picture representing the *First Horse Race in Pest* (1827, see Figure 7), traditional paintings used to show galloping horses with the two front legs extended forward and the two hind legs extended to the rear.

Figure 6: George Stubbs, *Baronet*, 1791 (source: Royal Collection Trust, https://www.rct.uk/collection/400587/baronet-with-samuel-chifney-up).

[3] Muybridge's zoopraxiscope was not entirely new in all its features: it made good use of earlier devices, most notably the phenakistiscope (1832) and the zoetrope (1833). Upon the technicalities of his work, see his *Descriptive Zoopraxography* (1893). Muybridge later went on to produce photo sequences of other animals, domestic and wild, and also sequences of humans, doing all sorts of everyday works or athletic activities. Of his several collections, see the 1887 edition of all his 781 plates in 3 volumes: *Muybridge's Complete Human and Animal Locomotion* (Mybridge, 1979).

Figure 7: Erdmann Gottlieb Prestel, *First Horse Race in Pest*, 1827 (source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prestel_loverseny_1827.jpg).

The Muybridge photo series changed this image for good, revealing how each leg of a galloping horse was at all times positioned differently from the other three legs, and displacing the classical image of the extended legs by another image that has since become emblematic in posters of western movies, showing all four legs up in the air pulled together under the body of the galloping horse. Thus, the photos ordered by Stanford were instrumental in the bringing-forth of what Walter Benjamin would later term the "optical unconscious," in this case, of the motion of trotting or galloping, a phenomenon which lay before our eyes, but lay hidden, until photo stills or slow-motion representations made it available for viewing in more temporal detail. All this might make one hesitant concerning to which tradition "Stanford" (the founder and the founded) really belongs: whether it (or he) is the forefront of fast serial analysis, or rather the promoter of slow motion. To be sure, these are not "two" distinct traditions in the first place.

Benjamin

By the "optical unconscious," Benjamin pointed to the way cinematic technology might assist in the observation of segments and events in space and time which the human eye is unable to behold. In an oft quoted passage of his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (third version, 1939), he writes:

> Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up [*Großaufnahme*], space expands; with slow motion [*Zeitlupe*], movement is extended. And just as enlargement [*Vergrößerung*] not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly "in any case," but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion [*Zeitlupe*] not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them [...] This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching [*Dehnen*] or compressing [*Raffen*] a sequence, enlarging [*Vergrößern*] or reducing [*Verkleinern*] an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (Benjamin 2006: 265–266; 1991: 500)

Although, for obvious historical and technological reasons, Benjamin focuses mainly on spatial and temporal enlargement – close-up (*Großaufnahme*, "large recording") and slow motion

(*Zeitlupe*, "time magnifier") –, at the end of the above passage he also points to the other direction: the possibility to accelerate or miniaturize images by "compressing a sequence" or "reducing an object." Moretti's bird's-eye view perspectives seem to be completing the latter half of the Benjaminian project. Should Benjamin be living at this hour (say, in the age both of superslow recordings and time-lapse videos), he would most certainly move the toilsome database-assembling work of his *Arcades Project* (in some ways itself a socio-economically oriented effort at "distant reading" *avant la lettre*) from Paris to California, and would be directing the Literary Lab at Stanford, with Franco Moretti perhaps on his side as research assistant. (Moretti makes sporadic references to Benjamin anyway, even though he never gives him due attention. See, for instance, his reliance on Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's competitive poetics, or his reference to the Benjaminian theme of distraction: Moretti 70 and 174.)

With the improvement of technology and the subsequent progress of digital humanities, the concept of literary studies, and more specifically, of reading itself, might be subject to change just as the concept of art (conceived according to the traditional art forms of painting and theatre) was shown to undergo traumatic changes with the appearance of photography and film, according to the epigraph from Valéry at the beginning of the third version of Benjamin's essay. Symptomatic of the trauma of this change is the way the very act of reading is being denied from "distant reading" by critics like Jonathan Culler, who claims that Moretti's practice is "scarcely reading at all" (Culler 20). In a tone of cultural pessimism, Culler expresses his misgivings about „an age where new electronic resources make it possible to do literary research without reading at all" (24). Related to this is Culler's conviction that, all appearances to the contrary, the real contrast to close reading is not distant reading (which, as we have just seen, does not even count as reading), but "sloppy" or "casual" reading, one which produces hasty reductions (20). Although this notion has been taken up by some other critics (Hancher 125, Jin 106 and 118–120), and has been supported by additional arguments (e.g. the "real" meaning of closeness as density, Hancher 124), the effort to do away with distant reading by not even considering it a real rival seems itself to be somewhat hasty, for it fails to critically account for the long metaphysical tradition of thought that has associated speed (or distant look) with insignificance and superficiality. Another recurrent claim worth mentioning is the concern over "scientism." This concern seems highly legitimate as a critical gesture targeting the fetishized status of scientific discourse, but it is oblivious of the historicity of that discourse and of the fears surrounding it, particularly of the fact that a couple of decades ago close reading itself was perceived as too scientific or too technical, and was, accordingly, taken as a threat to what *then* seemed a more natural mode of reading (Jin 118–120). Such gestures of denial or negation, just as the very eruption of the "reading wars" (Hensley 340), testify to the measure of the changes taking place in and around the techniques and technologies of reading and the different notions of "naturalness" in the background. In the wake of those changes, again, the very notion of reading seems now to undergo immense mutation.

That said, the picture still remains unfavorable for old school critics. In an era that seems to turn "the *longue durée* into a fetish" (Hayot 66), there is little glory for minute textual analysis. Without the addition of distant perspectives, close scrutiny remains blind to large-scale historical processes. A close reader (like de Man) will never see the forest for the trees, and like the novice player in the map game near the ending of Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" (1844), he is doomed to be a loser and an object of ridicule in the eyes of the smart serial analyst (Moretti) who has a long-range perspective and therefore an insight into the socio-economics of literature and the hidden forces of history that overarch decades or even centuries.

Poe

The aforementioned passage in Poe's narrative may serve as a starting point from where we could perhaps go even further. Here is how the map game is described by Poe's idiosyncratic detective Auguste Dupin:

> "There is a game of puzzles," he resumed, "which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word – the name of town, river, state or empire – any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident." (Poe 989–990)

Within the logic of the narrative, the Prefect's microscopic search is bound to remain unsuccessful, because the purloined letter is hidden by its very obtrusion, palpability, or self-evidence. It is not concealed at all. Instead, it is emphasized, or rather, overemphasized, made "too obtrusive" and "too palpable." What Poe's narrative offers here is an implicit theory of attention as a state of physiological or mental focusing. Dupin introduces his description of the map with a question as to "which of the street signs, over the shop doors, are the most attractive of attention" (Poe 989).

Attention indeed plays a crucial role both in previous and upcoming parts of the story. It figures in the primal scene of the letter's theft, a deed which is not in fact a theft in so far as it is a half-open act committed by the lynx-eyed Minister in front of the eyes of the letter's rightful owner, and only hidden from the third personage, to whom its content would be scandalous (Poe 977). If theft is a disguised but peaceful act, while robbery is open but violent, then it seems that, as far as its rightful owner is concerned, the "purloined" letter is taken away by a masterful act of robbery, rather than theft, since its owner is not tricked but indeed forced to let it go, in order to keep it unnoticed by the third person. It is half-purloined and half-robbed in this web of notices, gazes, and imperceptions. Likewise, attention also plays an elemental role in the letter's re-theft, which is indeed an act of pure theft. This act is based upon Dupin's minute but disguised scrutiny of the original during his first visit to the Minister, as well as on the momentary distraction of the Minister's attention by a well-choreographed street incident during his second visit.

Insofar as Poe's narrative is woven from scenes of attention (moments of its attraction or distraction, efforts to seek or avoid its focus), what he provides us is not simply a general theory of attention but, more specifically, a parallel theory of attention-seeking and attention-avoidance. The example of oversized street advertisements ("over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street") shows how failed attempts of attention-seeking may come handy for the purposes of attention-avoidance by making things "excessively obvious." With the analogy between "physical oversight" and "moral inapprehension," the suggested tactics for escaping notice is transplanted from the world of pure visuality to the wide terrain of mental operations, serving a perfect recipe for anyone who would wish to hide something from police detection. In this map game between thief and police, everything seems to depend on "range," as in an earlier passage Dupin rightly notes: "Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it" (Poe 983). The letter had not been hidden behind something else, nor had it been miniaturized to the point of near-annihilation. Right on the contrary: it had been left in the foreground, or rather, it had even been over-foregrounded. Therefore, Dupin needs to zoom out from the picture in order to notice what otherwise would have escaped his attention even without concealment, for the cunning of the thief seems to lie precisely in his attempt "to conceal this letter" by "not attempting to conceal it at all" (Poe 990).

In a passage reminiscent of treatments of the double infinite in Pascal, Voltaire, or Kant (or, for that matter, reminiscent of Paul de Man's epigraph to *Allegories of Reading*, taken from

Pascal: *Quand on lit trop vite ou trop doucement on n'entend rien*),[4] Poe's ingenious detective expressly calls our attention to the risk of perpetual error so apparent in the inefficiency of the police. This error presents a latent threat to anyone who would commit himself to search either "too deep" or "too shallow" (Poe 984), for both of these may just be erring in the wrong range. Bringing the example of the legendary schoolboy, who was admired for his success at guessing in the game of "even and odd," Dupin goes on to highlight the importance of observing and admeasuring the "astuteness" of the opponent and determining the proper range of search accordingly. He explains why allowing "no variation of principle" and sticking to just "one principle or set of principles of search" produces no results:

> They [the police] have no variation of principle in their investigations [...] What is all this boring, and probing, and sounding, and scrutinizing with the microscope, and dividing the surface of the building into registered square inches – what is it all but an exaggeration *of the application* of the one principle or set of principles of search, which are based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity, to which the Prefect, in the long routine of his duty, has been accustomed? (Poe 985, emphasis in the original)

In the particular case of the purloined letter, Dupin's observations and admeasurements lead him to the conclusion that the thief's mindset is not just that of a mathematician but also that of a poet, which implies a more sophisticated, if not outright paradoxical, mode of concealment, described above, one which conceals by not concealing at all. To match up his opponent, Dupin must become an analyst, but he can become an analyst only insofar as he himself is able to become "both mathematician and poet" (Poe 988). Mere mathematical reasoning will not do. It must be supplemented by a poetic sense for "ruses." As Dupin points out:

> if the Minister had been no more than a mathematician, the Prefect would have been under no necessity of giving me this cheque. I knew him, however, as both mathematician and poet [...] His frequent absences from home at night, which were hailed by the Prefect as certain aids to his success, I regarded only as *ruses*... (Poe 988, emphasis in the original)

That is why Dupin eventually decides to zoom out, and that is also why, as a narrator, he turns to the other example, that of the map game, to explain and illustrate his decision. He does so with a rare but all the more memorable reflection on the way rhetoric (and more specifically, figural language: "metaphor, or simile") is able both to "strengthen" and to "embellish" one's discourse (Poe 989).

Yet, while the example of the map game is indeed imaginative and well-rounded as a final decoration of Dupin's oration and is also in line with his argument concerning the need to change ranges, it does not entirely cohere with the whole of his narrative, even though that is what it is ultimately supposed to encapsulate. Its focus on the different ranges of attention does not seem to do justice to all the details in the story. In view of the epitomic scene of detection, the example of the map game is, in fact, slightly misleading, for it is not simply its trivial size or position (its relative largeness or "hyperobtrusive situation," Poe 991) that will make the purloined letter vanish from the eyes of the police. The excruciating difficulty to find it also consists in its figural dissimulation. Although its size is still the same, its outlook is "radically different" (Poe 991). It still looks a letter all right, but what kind of letter is another question. Its largeness or obtrusiveness is merely an illustration for an unhidden object that nevertheless escapes attention just because the range of the search does not match the range of the object's placement. But the letter also escapes attention in a wholly different manner, through figural transformation, by appearing not for what it is. As Dupin underlines, "the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed and re-sealed" (Poe 992). And it has even been torn half apart, to look as if it were just another everyday piece of paper, a shabby document of no special

[4] "When we read too quickly or too slowly, we understand nothing" (Pascal 16, fragment 75).

significance. Thus, its obtrusive placement is but a surplus addition, an over-insurance of sorts, or a simple mockery, as compared to its figural reshaping. What Dupin needs in order to understand the poetic vein of the thief, is not just a careful adjustment of scale, but an additional ability, a radically "poetic" sense for figuration, which in this case is a sense for transfiguration or even disfiguration. He cannot simply look for the same "form" on a different level of "quantity." If that is what poets do, then poets are not really different from mathematicians, as far as mathematics is defined, as Dupin defines it, as a science of "form and quantity" (Poe 987). If there is anything a poetic eye can see, which the eye of a mathematician cannot, it is not "form" (in whatever "quantity," size or number), but deformation or transformation. If the letter has been deceptively transfigured, then its detection requires a poetic sense not only for different ranges (different quantities of still the same form), but a sense for dissimulation, for *permutatio* in the rhetorical sense (allegory or irony, or any other instance of figural pretense), if at all it makes any sense to speak here still of a poetic perception or "sense." Dupin's notion of poetry is still all too mathematical, and the alternative principle of search he advocates is still very much the same as the one he wishes to surpass, for to come back to an earlier analogy, "deep" and "shallow" are part of the same system of search and thus exposed to the same fatality. That a microscopic search produces no results does not mean that a macro-scale investigation will necessarily do better.

What is needed here is not simply a shift *within* the range of the search (a shift from close to more distant scrutiny, or vice versa), but a shift *from* "range" as such, a shift from perception to reading, from the literal to the figural, from form to deformation, a radical shift in the heuristics of the search itself. Reading has to trace what it is to find or invent. And tracing always implies mutation. The purloined letter is radically out of range, for no actual range can sufficiently guarantee its detection. Thus, no distant look will find it either, let alone close scrutiny. Dupin's success is only partially due to his distant perspective. For what one would need to notice instead of the trees, is not even the forest, but a shape or pattern in the wilderness which has but a remote resemblance to either trees or forests and may have nothing to do with vegetation altogether. The popular visual riddles in the 19th century, with hiding figures in the bushes or among the trees (of humans, or animals, or objects), just as their more modern descendants (like Voltaire's ambiguous bust in Salvador Dalí's emblematic painting, or the hiding sculls scattered in many of the drawings by István Orosz), are examples for a "poetic" engagement not simply with ranges but also with inconstancy, disfiguration, anamorphosis, or mutability. When, for instance, we choose to reread a work or some of its passages, as we have just done with Poe's text, and we do so by placing it, to some extent, into a series (Stanford, Benjamin, Poe…), it is difficult to decide whether we have examined it more "closely," or rather, more "distantly," bringing forth, precisely by comparative seralization, a pattern (that of approximation and distancing), which otherwise would have remained barely visible, or would have hardly attained such sense or critical significance. But we can also see the ways in which non-identical repetition between the elements of the series involves slippages, displacements, or mutation, and how much, for the pattern to become distinctly visible within this group of texts, it was necessary to also take heed of these changes, that is, to consider this repetition between the serialized elements as a repetition with a difference, i.e. as iteration, which is the fundament for any comparative analysis.

With the development of digital humanities, and the advent of "flexible" or "zoomable" readings (Hancher 128; Jin 115), based on a peaceful co-existence or co-operation of close and distant modes of analysis, the "reading wars" may someday be left behind (English and Underwood 292). In a recent essay devoted specifically to scales, some computational critics at Stanford (including Moretti) claim that while traditional literary criticism adhered to an anthropocentric (middle) scale, computer assisted investigators have ventured into "the extremes of the literary scale" in both directions, and "this mix of micro and macro has become the signature of the digital humanities, and of their dramatic impact on the scale at which literature is studied" (Algee-Hewitt et al. 4 and 1). Then they offer a reinvented middle scale in

the form of the "paragraph" to demonstrate how "*different scales activate different structural features*," and accordingly, how "*scale is directly correlated to the differentiation of textual functions*" (21, emphases in the original). The essay also offers the witty reinvention (implicit over-foregrounding) of the title of Voltaire's philosophical short story *Micromégas* as the title of their opening chapter. All this is certainly legitimate to say or do, but even so, the unanswered question concerning the very status of scaling remains with us. If Poe's text was right and analysis has to go beyond mere mathematical reasoning, then the purely quantitative logic of scales or ranges will no longer suffice. One cannot do without scales for sure. Reading can only occur on this or that particular scale. But there is more to reading than mere scales. One must always be ready not only to *shift* but also to *quit* ranges, to go beyond any particular range. Reading, if it is to be inventive, i.e., if it is to come across or come up with hitherto unseen findings that are not only unexpected but are opening new routes and perspectives for further visions, has to find ways in which it can surpass the map game, the game of approximation and distancing, of slowing down or speeding up, a mere game of ranges. It must become radically escalated: it cannot just play the game of scales to an extreme, but must also learn to go beyond that game, to place itself out of all scale, and become "escalated" as any reading, worthy of that name, has always managed to do – if, at all, there *is* to be such a thing as reading.

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