

# Thinking Small

## Ecologies of Close Reading

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[E]ven such a small book could go beyond merely finding and identifying to suggest, albeit subtly, such things as what life may be like in terms of a fiddler crab's existence, or a barnacle's.

Rachel Carson<sup>1</sup>

This chapter understands modernist close reading in an expanded sense, as an open-ended practice of attention to the look and feel of things. This practice is not exclusively directed at literary texts. Rather, it is a way of seeing that takes a wide variety of phenomena—from a poem to a fiddler crab—as life-worlds to be read. Close reading, understood in this manner, is less a specific strategy than an ethical relation: it names a willingness to suspend what Roland Barthes calls the 'will to possess' ('le vouloir-saisir') in order to recognize the indeterminacy and variability of the world around us.<sup>2</sup> Sensitive to valences of difference, alert to elisions and silences, the close reader cultivates patience as she learns to listen for the intermittent and the unexpected. Her attention is oriented toward the *small*—toward minute objects and ephemeral patterns of existence. What is life like for a barnacle?, the close reader may ask. My wager is that this intense but everyday observational mode draws on two forms of thought that might not ordinarily appear to be connected. Modernist close reading is where the aesthetic and the ecological meet.

My guides to modernist closeness in this chapter will be marine biologist Rachel Carson and literary and cultural theorist Roland Barthes. I'll focus in particular on two works that exemplify close reading's imaginative open-endedness—what we might call, following Barthes, its cognitive or affective

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Carson to Paul Brooks of Houghton Mifflin, 28 July, 1950. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. Rosalind Krauss (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 14.