

## Introductory Note

“*W*e live in an age when the detail enjoys a rare prominence” is the opening sentence of Naomi Schor’s 1987 book, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*. Like so much of Schor’s work, the comment, in its description of the then current scene, seemed both utterly right and strikingly new. The detail was there for all to see, driving the rhetorical energy of poststructuralist thinking (indeed, Michel Foucault had called for a “History of the Detail,” Schor points out, “which would chart its passage from a theological category in the Age of Classicism to its present role as an instrument of both knowledge and power” [3]), but the detail Schor brought forth was at the same time unfamiliar. For one thing, her detail had a history. The textual detail so crucial to poststructuralist theory was, she argued, inseparable from the abjected *particular* of Western idealism: “For as any historian of ideas knows, the detail until very recently has been viewed in the West with suspicion if not downright hostility” (3). Moreover, Schor goes on, the detail, bounded on either side by the ornamental and the prosaic, was historically gendered as feminine. Given that history, what to make of poststructuralism’s detail, the “desublimated detail” of Foucault or Derrida or Barthes? “Viewed in a historical perspective, the

ongoing valorization of the detail appears to be an essential aspect of the dismantling of Idealist metaphysics which looms so large on the agenda of modernity” (3–4). But does the newly valued detail retain its femininity? And what of its synecdochic nature? What is the relationship of the detail to truth?

The question of truth is engaged by the way Schor’s book both embodies and resists “the lure of the detail.” Like realism itself, it “is as much a discourse *on* the detail as a discourse *of* the detail” (142). While pointedly reminding the reader that her “feminist archaeology” of the detail “is by definition fragmentary—those seeking a totalizing, exhaustive *history* of the detail more congenial to male epistemological models will be disappointed” (4–5)—she sharply contests the objection that this approach is merely “arbitrary.” To accept such a view would be to dismiss the detail all over again, to regress to the idealist aesthetic whose misogyny Schor discloses in a set of readings that is unmistakably *historical*, if that term indicates attention to inherited convention, to the sheer weight of the past, as well as to ineluctable change and its agents. Indeed, if *Reading in Detail* responds to a certain poststructuralist revival of the detail, that is, by a transformation of the detail’s critical status, Schor’s ambition at its most general is to demonstrate that that transformation is part of a wider reconfiguration of the status of women: “[I]f today the detail and the wider semantic field it commands enjoys an undisputed legitimacy, it is because the dominant paradigms of patriarchy have been largely eroded. Eroded, but not eradicated” (4). Reading in detail does not obscure (historical) generalization. At the same time, Schor insists that her interest in the detail—and by extension, all reading in detail—has an idiosyncratic element.

*My own love of the detail—and like all loves this love is shot through with ambivalence—is inextricably bound up with my Oedipus: my father, a goldsmith, was a master of ornamental detail, a Renaissance artist in the age of high modernism and minimalism [ . . . ]. In asserting the detail’s claim to aesthetic dignity and epistemological prestige, my motivation is then double: to endow with legitimacy my own brand of feminist hermeneutics, while giving value to my father’s craft. (7)*

This doubleness, this imbrication of the general and the particular, characterizes Schor’s account of all readings, including those that imagine themselves somehow to transcend the merely sensuous forms of

expression, to capture some totality otherwise. As she puts the question to a Hegelian position marked by “strictures against particularity”: *can there be representation without particularization*” (27)? Without collapsing the detail into the particular—indeed, by challenging that often dismissive conflation—Schor demonstrates that reading can never escape the workings of the particular, indeed, must pass through those workings in the form of the detail in order to propose any interpretation whatsoever, and this despite the epistemological dangers entailed. “To read in detail is, however tacitly, to invest the detail with a truth-bearing function, and yet as *Reading in Detail* repeatedly shows, the truth value of the detail is anything but assured. As the guarantor of meaning, the detail is for that reason constantly threatened by falsification and misprision. *Reading in Detail* is thus both a defense of the detail and an illustration of its lures” (7).

In April 2003, *differences* and the Pembroke Center honored Naomi Schor’s work with a conference entitled “The Lure of the Detail: Critical Reading Today.” Schor’s insight that the “gendered aesthetic detail lies at the heart of the problematic of the aesthetic as a critical category” animates the essays in this volume, which are drawn from that conference. The confidence with which they address the detail and press its insights, even as they acknowledge its lures, rests upon the readings in *Reading in Detail*. In the years since Schor’s intervention, the historical has loomed larger and larger within the field of literary study; it overwhelmed the aesthetic, swamping its critical influence as a problematic of reading in a mass of local, specific details. More recently, however, a new formalism (not to be confused with the poetic movement of the same name) has begun to suggest that reading and, thus, inevitably, a different kind of detail or a different relation to the detail than the one enabled by a contextualizing historicism, is in need of revival. Such a shift in critical interest is not, of course, a matter of returning to the past, but rather a question of repetition with a difference, a displacement, a doubling back or reading backwards. To a certain kind of historical imagination, the detail is always a matter of details, of amassing ever larger quantities of material to place in the balance of a historical argument. The new formalism reveals a desire to sift through that mass at a different pace, to notice and to make palpable the weight of the individual detail and thus to explore—or perhaps to exploit?—its synecdochic power. Reading in detail does not refuse history, but renews it in a more seductive form.

—*The Editors*