theories and methodologies

Whose Forms? Missing Russians in Caroline Levine's *Forms*

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CAROLINE LEVINE'S *FORMS* HAS BEEN RECEIVED AS A PROTOTYPE AND A MANIFESTO, A SIGN OF THE NEW FORMALIST TIMES IN AMERICAN LITERary studies. In the cover endorsements for the hardbound edition, Amanda Claybaugh calls *Forms* a "book of a generation," Bruce Robbins "a big, brilliant, necessary book"—large claims for a text of 150 pages. Levine's treatise promises no less than "a way to understand the relations among forms—forms aesthetic and social, spatial and temporal, ancient and modern, major and minor, like and unlike, punitive and narrative, material and metrical" (23). Levine claims to provide "a reading practice that does not fit any familiar formalism," a practice that instead "draws from all" formalisms (21).

Calling for a reading practice—and, if less clearly, activism—that casts an equally practiced eye on aesthetic and political forms, Levine proposes to correct the errors of generations of formalist and historicist critics to synthesize an agile and expansive new method.[1] Along the way, she boldly corrects Michel Foucault ("Foucault was right to focus on the shapes and arrangements that structure everyday experience. But I have come to believe that he was wrong to imagine that these forms converge in massive regimes of coordinated power" [xiii]); Karl Marx (a goal of the book is to "unsettle the power of another explanatory form in literary and cultural studies: the dialectic" [18]); Marxist critics, sketched and summed in broad strokes; and New Critics. I have no problem with her critique of the last; the other critiques deserve more debate.

Many moments in the book are perceptive, clever, and elegant, especially when they pertain to academia, as in passages on the seminar classroom (46–48) and institutions' uneven, coexisting temporalities—the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, for many universities and departments (60–61). I am, moreover, entirely convinced that the call for renewed formalism(s) is timely and important. But the holes in *Forms* strike me as less incidental to than symptomatic of fault lines and blind spots in contemporary critical discussions, which are weakened by a kind of Anglo-American academic insularity and a critical presentism

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different from what Levine deflects in the preface (xii). If previous formalisms were truly limited to readings that "missed the political power and situatedness of constraining forms" (14) and if historicist readings exclusively relegated aesthetic forms to a secondary position, *Forms* would indeed be a book of a generation. We would also be in serious trouble.

The examples that Levine draws on to illustrate the defects of past formalisms derive primarily from New Criticism, which is fair enough for an intervention within a more narrowly defined field (English) or subfield (Victorian studies). But Levine claims to dramatically improve on *every* major formalist tradition. She writes, "[E]very major formalist tradition has limited its definition of form" in such a way as to miss what she calls the principal "affordances" of forms (11). Her broad and abstract understanding of form ("all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" [3]) has less in common with some of those traditions than with design theory.

It is perhaps inevitable that a scholar of Russian and East European literature should be dismayed that *Forms* neglects to mention Russian formalism or its immediate intellectual heirs. The omission is all the more striking given the Russophilia of some of Levine's contemporary interlocutors and rivals (e.g., Franco Moretti, Fredric Jameson; even Slavoj Žižek makes an appearance in the final chapter on the television show *The Wire*). But Viktor Shklovsky and Iurii Tynianov are missing here; so too are Roman Jakobson, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Iurii Lotman—hardly obscure or marginal figures in modern literary theory. Of course, Levine is under no obligation to be comparative or comprehensive. And yet I would argue that the absent Russians in *Forms* matter—for the profound counterexample that they offer of revolutionary formalism.

Levine has Cleanth Brooks in mind when she writes:

> It is in part this embrace of unity as an objective that has prompted the field to squirm at the political implications of New Critical reading. When we think of form, we think of a containing wholeness, which in turn calls up frightening models of political control and totality, ranging from fascist wholeness to liberal assimilation. . . . Does a formalist reading practice always and necessarily entail a valuing of containment and exclusion? (31)

If we open the discussion to other traditions, we find that the question was answered a century ago. I venture that a comparative look at form as understood by the more radical Russian formalists, such as the Saint Petersburg Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ) theorists Shklovsky and Tynianov, might do more to illuminate the shortcomings of current theoretical models than a new book.

In *The Problem of Verse Language* (1924), Tynianov writes, "We have just recently overcome the celebrated analogy: form-content = glass-wine" (32). Distancing himself from such reductive spatial analogies, he draws a different opposition, between static and dynamic understandings of form.[2] For Tynianov, form is fundamentally unlike the wineglass because it is changeable, propelled into motion by the competing motors of archaism and innovation. A dynamic understanding of form in turn suggests that the central project of literary theory should be to trace a living history of form, inevitably intersecting with the social and political. As Dragan Kujundžić puts it, Tynianov's work persistently attempts "to articulate the notion of the literary 'with other theoretical and practical fields.' . . . This articulation takes place, most notably, within Tynianov's attempts to temporalize form in the realm of the historical" (105).[3]

Ilya Kliger identifies a similar vitalism in Shklovsky's manifesto "Art as Device," published in 1916. He writes:

> For Shklovsky, life itself, our everyday existence, is imbued with static forms: forms of

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> perception, forms of behavior, regularities and conventions of all sorts—to such a degree that we have become lifeless. Shklovsky refers to this as automatization, blaming it for the impoverishment of experience and for ethical nihilism. Art, for Shklovsky, is called upon to estrange the all-too-formal experience of everyday life, to de-automatize it and make it once again genuinely life-like. In other words, artistic forms are positioned on the same side as true life (vitality, freshness, newness, the quickening of life).[4]

While we can certainly find emphasis on aesthetic autonomy in the OPOYAZ formalists, the concept merges in their writing with what Kliger calls a "long-standing Russian tradition of attributing to literary production a central place in the struggle for social and political change." Not only did they understand literature as having a profound impact on all other aspects of social life; the social imaginary within which Russian formalism developed was shaped by the struggle to conjure into being a new language, a new man, and a new political world.

Whereas the favored object of study for the Russian formalists was avant-garde poetry, Levine's most convincing readings are of the Victorian novel. The formalism of the early-twentieth-century Russians shares with their reading matter and revolutionary context a reflected belief in the possibility of dramatically reimagining aesthetic and political realms alike. The nineteenth-century English novel, comparatively speaking, views bourgeois society as the stable norm.

If Levine's imagined formalist is a New Critic, her historicist strawman, as intimated by the autobiographical preface, might well be one of the reductive historicists Levine encountered in graduate school at Birkbeck, University of London: "every scholar was a Marxist of one variety or another. All of my teachers insisted on historical methods with a political urgency that was new to me—and compelling" (x). She seems to have mostly contemporaries in mind (Jameson and Moretti are named in the introduction [14]) when she makes claims such as the following:

> The Marxist emphasis on aesthetic forms as epiphenomenal—as secondary—has some distorting effects. First, it prevents us from understanding politics as a matter of form, and second, it assumes that one kind of form—the political—is always the root or ground of the other—the aesthetic. Let me offer an example of what it would mean to read literary forms not as epiphenomenal responses to social realities but as forms encountering other forms. (14)

Which Marxist distortion is this, precisely? Whither the legacies of Louis Althusser? of Theodor Adorno? Why are they too missing from *Forms*?

The pulse—or rhythm, to use one of Levine's key terms—that beats within Russian formalism beats too in the work of many of the most compelling Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century. I avoid dwelling here on the mid-century debates of French Marxism. William S. Lewis summarizes the situation French communists found themselves in after 1956, which began with Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech on 25 February and ended when the Soviet tanks entered Budapest along the Danube on 4 November. French intellectual Marxism and the French Communist Party alike "lacked the theoretical resources to deal with the fact that the Soviet Union could no longer be identified with the truth of Marxism" (161–62).

Althusser tried to correct his generation's understanding of Marxist theory, reading both Stalinist and humanist positions as inconsistent with Marxist thought. Peter Dews writes:

> According to Althusser, the distinguishing feature of the Marxist conception of the social whole is its refusal to reduce real complexity to some underlying principle of unity, whether this principle be envisaged as spiritual or

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> material. . . . Althusser affirms that a social formation must be viewed as a "decentered totality" in which each instance—the economic, the political and the ideological being the initial three which Althusser distinguishes—possesses its own autonomy and effectivity. (113–14)

Each practice is overdetermined by others, not determined by an economic base as in reductive Marxism. The Althusserian revolution that followed the publication of Althusser's *Pour Marx* (1965; *For Marx*) and *Lire le Capital* (1965; *Reading Capital*), by Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Jacques Rancière, and Pierre Macherey, was intellectually emancipatory to many thinkers—if also potentially revisionist and self-affirming.

But let us return to an earlier moment in the history of twentieth-century Marxism, to Adorno and Walter Benjamin's exchange in the 1930s on the questionable dialecticism of Benjamin's work on Charles Baudelaire. As John Guillory summarizes in "Genesis of the Media Concept":

> Benjamin drew a connection between the imposition of a wine tax on the citizens of Paris in the years 1849 and 1850 and the composition of Baudelaire's poems thematizing wine and intoxication. The larger movement of Benjamin's argument can be bracketed in order to consider Adorno's vehement response: "Let me express myself in as simple and Hegelian manner as possible. Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic is lacking in one thing: mediation." Adorno objected to the "direct inference from the duty on wine to L'Ame du vin" and argued contrarily that "the materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*." (358)

Adorno located Benjamin's study instead as residing "at the crossroads of magic and positivism" (qtd. in Guillory 358). Guillory's reading of the exchange draws attention to the interrelation of media and mediation, casting Adorno's rejection of Benjamin's manuscript as a "failure to acknowledge the medium of his communication" (362). But the point remains that we have seen nearly a century of sophisticated formalist and Marxist thought debate the relationship of aesthetic and political forms that *Forms* claims to discover in 2015. What then is the new insight afforded by design theory?

Forms is clearly intended as a provocation, but it seems important to point out that it works as one far better within its field and that such new formalism reads as bold within a limited context. Levine's reading of *The Wire* in the last chapter is indicative: entertaining, clever, but also oddly light, and it reduces (or translates) *The Wire* to a Victorian novel. (Levine writes, "Along the way, the series, like *Bleak House*, offers an unconventional account of agency" [149].) Missing entirely, for example, is a discussion of the historic number of black actors afforded principal roles by the series or of its significance for prestige television—both opportunities to do something politically interesting with the binary and network forms Levine interrogates throughout. But there is not much borrowed from media studies in this literature-centric vision despite frequent appeals to the visual. Nor is there much of modernism and the avant-garde, apart from a brief discussion of Constantin Brancusi's *A Bird in Space*.

To my mind, these omissions are absolutely formally connected with political quietism—a rebuke Levine acknowledges but rejects. She writes, "Carolyn Lesjak has recently argued against the version of formalism I articulate here, because she sees it as a recipe for political quietism. But in fact the primary goal of this formalism is radical social change" (18). Were Levine's call to "*export*" formalist reading practices ("to take our traditional skills to new objects—the social structures and institutions that are among the most crucial sites of political

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efficacy" [23]) entirely convincing, we might expect to find Victorian scholars leading the revolt at the next barricades.

Indeed, the politics of *Forms* seem liberal by definition:

> If forms always contain and confine, and if it is impossible to imagine societies without forms, then the most strategic political action will not come from revealing or exposing illusion, but rather from a careful, nuanced understanding of the many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern experience. (18)

The central argument of the book, in a sense, is that various enduring forms collide in intersecting ways and that the results could well be emancipatory. But the unspecified political action that Levine advocates as kindred to her readings appears entirely declawed, compared with either the formalist or Marxist precursors that I know and love. Instead, she continues:

> But while it is no doubt true that much painful historical experience has emerged out of deep social contradictions, I argue in this book that the binary opposition is just one of a number of powerfully organizing forms, and that many outcomes follow from other forms, as well from more mundane, more minor, and more contingent formal encounters, where different forms are not necessarily related, opposed, or deeply expressive, but simply happen to cross paths at a particular site. (19)

The moral consequences and the potential for unwitting cruelty of such a position are made evident in an early passage that characterizes the suffering of women with children in academia as an institutional accident:

> In many cases, when forms meet, their collision produces unexpected consequences, results that cannot always be traced back to deliberate intentions or dominant ideologies. In a brief but familiar example, most women in academia experience a powerful tension between the biological "clock"—the years when the female body is capable of biological reproduction—and the tenure clock—the university's timetable for evaluating probationary faculty. This is one reason why a disproportionately high number of women *opt for academic jobs as adjuncts and part-timers*. Since the tenure system predates the entry of women in any substantial numbers into the academy, these consequences do not flow from any particular patriarchal intention or ideology other than the assumption of an uninterrupted adult life. In other words, this clash of temporal forms does not result from an intention to keep women in their places; it is an unplanned collision between two temporal forms, one biological and the other institutional.
>
> (8; emphasis added)

University administrations are innocent of patriarchal or exploitative intentions here, but women "opt for" life in the academic precariat. No one is to blame—only unplanned collisions between forms.

To read a bit symptomatically, I find it telling finally that Levine borrows from design theory her central concept of "affordances" (6–11). She makes appeals throughout *Forms* to glossier, more commercially friendly social sciences. (See, for example, her reading of *Antigone*, which draws from international relations theory [85].) In a generous review for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, David Alworth calls Levine's method "Formalism 2.0" and writes that *Forms* partakes in the "method wars" of the twenty-first century: "While questions of method have always been part of the literary-critical enterprise, they have become newly urgent in the face of rapidly shifting technological, economical, and pedagogical conditions within higher education."[5] Jonathan Loesberg, in a review for *Victorian Studies*, acknowledges Levine's "querulous and reductive dismissals of much historicist reading" but finds the argument that "forms can have conflicting consequences" a useful "new direction or course correction" (560).

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In the light of present conditions in higher education—which I remain tempted to read in old-fashioned Marxist terms—Levine's very declarations of the newness of her method read as a symptom of the marketplace: every academic book must claim to be "a methodological starting point" (23). We are creatures of our times in the end: Levine's formalism is very much of our moment, just as the Russian formalists were of theirs. But I agree with Levine that temporalities in academia, twenty-first- and twentieth-century, can appear to flow backward.

Notes

1. As David Alworth puts it, "This method, call it Formalism 2.0, promises not only to be more agile than its New Critical predecessor but also to address the relationship between cultural artifacts and political arrangements, thereby fixing the bug of apolitical close reading that marred version 1.0."

2. I am much indebted to Ilya Kliger's incisive critical comparison of the two formalisms presented by OPOYAZ: Russian formalism and digital humanities quantitative formalism, such as Moretti's distant reading.

3. Kujundžić draws a close comparison to Jacques Derrida's understanding of form: "A genre or a form are, for Tynianov, positioned *in between*: a stylus, a style, an incision on the body of the origin, and the body of the more originary, more archaic writing" (106).

4. See also Shklovsky 5.

5. Kliger writes, "[T]hese methods arise in the midst of at least a triple crisis within academic literary study: the traumatic loss of its capacity for high-theoretical expansionism into the neighboring disciplines; the mounting demand for self-justification in the face of shrinking positions and funds; and the resulting pressures towards consilience with the natural and social sciences." Alan Liu relates the "general crisis of the meaningfulness of the humanities," brought to the surface by debates in digital literary studies, to "the world system with social, economic, science-engineering, work-place, and popular-culture knowledges that do not necessarily value meaning," privileging instead "research, evidence, analysis, method, productivity, and 'impact'" (419).

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