theories and methodologies

Fantastic Forms

LANGDON HAMMER

AS A TERM IN CASUAL CIRCULATION IN LITERARY STUDY TODAY, *FORMALISM* TYPICALLY INVOLVES A REIFICATION OF LITERARY FORM, ABSTRACTing form from its material contexts and therefore from everything that colors and conditions it. Form and history have been conceptualized as neatly opposed alternatives rather than, as they might have been, necessary partners.

There is also a tendency to fix on certain instances of form as emblematic of form as such. When we speak about formalist poets, we mean specifically poets who use rhyme and meter. It is as if poets who do not use those techniques do not write poems with form or are not invested in the form of their poems. Rhyme and meter historically have been symbols of constraint and enclosure, although they can each be used in various ways. Insofar as rhyme and meter are also commonplace symbols of poetic form, they suggest that constraint and enclosure are the first ideas we associate with form in poetry, and perhaps with form in literature generally.

The model formalist poet thus defined is probably Alexander Pope. Pope is the master of the heroic couplet, the literary form of constraint and enclosure par excellence, and a verse technique seemingly consistent with Enlightenment rationalism and the manners of eighteenth-century polite society. "'True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance, / As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance," he suavely asserts in "An Essay on Criticism." "'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence, / The *Sound* must seem an *Echo* of the *Sense*" (155). But much is not easy in Pope's poetry. Far from avoiding harshness and offense, it is full of invective; think of the weaponized cacophony of *The Dunciad*. Nor are his other principles necessarily fulfilled in practice. In the heroic couplet, sound constructs sense instead of echoing it. As to constraint and enclosure, what reader hasn't felt vertigo in the middle of a Pope poem and dreaded that those couplets might never stop? Whatever intimations of totality or unity one of his couplets projects, the next one confounds, or at least complicates.

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Caroline Levine's *Forms* is not a book especially concerned with literary form. Rather, Levine proceeds as if the definition of literary form is settled and rather straightforward. The "bounded whole" is the first form she discusses, and Cleanth Brooks's "well wrought urn" is her first example of it (21, 27). Her revelation that the work of art is more intricate and volatile than Brooks's urn suggests ("What if we understood literary texts not as unified but as inevitably plural in their forms . . . ?" [40]) only counts as an advance in her argument because she started from such a simple idea. Rhythm, hierarchy, network: when these terms enter her book, they add increasing complexity and interest, but the integral object with clearly defined borders is the theoretical point of departure. As Levine puts it with respect to social organization, "forms always contain and confine" (18). So she finds fault with recent scholarship that focuses on "indeterminate spaces and identities." These are "places where the binary"—the gender binary, for example—"breaks down or dissolves, generating possibilities that turn the form into something more ambiguous and ill-defined—formless." When we are dealing with something other than a whole, and the inside and outside of the form are not sharply marked, we find "formal failures, incompletion, and indefinability" (9).

If that's so, anyone who studies, say, Middle English lyrics or the avant-garde is busy with a formless literature. But, again, Levine's book is not interested in literary form in all its variety. "One of the great achievements of literary formalism has been the development of rich vocabularies and highly refined skills for differentiating among forms," she says, and leaves the matter there (4). Her innovative contribution, as she declares many times, is to use the techniques of a formalist literary critic (as she defines one) to read the social world and make effective interventions in it. The idea is that the techniques of literary criticism are immediately transferable to social analysis because forms are not the exclusive property of either the aesthetic or the social. Rather, "defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements," forms "travel" and "migrate" across contexts and periods and are "capable of imposing their arrangements on both social life and literary texts" (5).

What does the social world look like when we see it as a collection of interacting forms? Literature furnishes examples. Levine's include *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, *North and South*, *Antigone*, *Bleak House*, and *The Wire*. But let's return to Pope. In *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope's London is a map of shapes ("the *Box*," "the *Ring*," "*Hide*-Park *Circus*," "*Hampton-Court*," and lowly "*Bow*" [219, 219, 235, 236, 235]) across which people move like pieces on a game board. Things, by contrast, have independent agency and considerable material force: "Thrice rung the Bell, the Slipper knock'd the Ground, / And the press'd Watch return'd a silver sound"; "And Garters, Stars, and Coronets appear"; "Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive"; "Fans clap, Silks russle, and tough Whalebones crack"; and so on (219, 221, 221, 238). Personification is not what's going on here. Even synecdoche doesn't seem quite right. Instead of taking on human qualities, the things that Pope mentions have a repertoire of limited but emphatic action through which they communicate and relate to each other. They circulate in a formal system for which people are, if not irrelevant, then instrumental, reversing the usual relation between subject and object.

The center of this primitive magic is Belinda's toilet. She and her maid watch in wonder as, of their own volition, "Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once," and the "Off 'rings of the World appear":

> This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,
> And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.
> The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,

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> Transformed to *Combs*, the speckled and the white.
> Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,
> Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux. (222)

This rhetoric is close to that of modern advertising. Probably it would be a mistake to say that Pope was aware in just the way we are of how his language mystifies the human labor that "[t]ransformed" the creatures that were killed to make those combs. But he understands that there is more to this picture than appears to the delirious consumer. Things are having their way here. When they do, human agency and the relations of domination and subjection that structure the imperial economy are evacuated. What is left are so many soap bubbles: "Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux."

Commodity fetishism is Karl Marx's name for this dematerialization of the object and the concealment of the social relations that support it.[1] Explicating the concept, Marx describes the transformation of a wooden table under the spell of exchange value:

> A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. . . . It is as clear as noonday, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was. (47)

Part of Marx's point is that not all forms are equivalent. Wood is one thing, a table another, and the commodity yet another. This is more than what Levine means when she says blandly, "*Forms differ*" (4). The commodity form inserts the table in a cash economy, where it seems to act with a mind of its own. Its "wooden brain" evolves "grotesque ideas" expressive of a metaphysics "more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was" because human agency is more thoroughly masked in the commodity form than in the operations of spiritualism. Marx's table has entered into a system where its value is defined in relation to other commodities rather than the labor that produced it or its use value. In the commodity, "a definite social relation between men" assumes the "fantastic form" of "a relation between things" (Marx 47).

Forms begins with a brief intellectual autobiography. Levine explains that her father was "a liberal humanist and historian of ideas" who "often read literary writers" and "wrote on Pope and Swift." She followed his example by studying the humanities, but literature rather than history; and as a student of literature, she resisted her father's insistence on the primacy of authorial intention and the importance of intellectual context. She preferred to "track subtle arrangements of words and images interwoven through literary texts" (ix). She was by nature a formalist.

In college, that disposition was gratified. Levine's "teachers performed readings so dazzling that a physical thrill would run through me," and Levine found herself "falling in love with poststructuralist ways of reading." Graduate study, however, introduced her to new historicism and to questions of "power and injustice." Historicist methods (e.g., research in "Parliamentary papers and conduct manuals") seemed "dreary," yet the ethical arguments that historicism advanced were compelling, and in that light, the pleasures of deconstruction felt "self-indulgent." She wondered, "If conduct books contributed as much as poems to a given culture, then why

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wouldn't I become a historian like my father? And if social justice should be my goal, then could I justify a lifetime of studying literature?" (ix).

One of the polemical aims of *Forms* is to challenge the possibility of periodization—a refreshing move, given the sacrosanct status of periods in literary scholarship and the rigid ways they structure department hiring and curricula. But anyone who studied literature in the same decades as Levine will recognize the content of her education and the questions it raised. In Levine's account of her intellectual development, we can make out the rough shape of a specifiable period in literary study.

In the postwar era, liberal humanism had a central role in undergraduate education in the United States, and the English major flourished. To be sure, there were methodological conflicts between, for example, formalists trained in the New Criticism and scholars working in biography, intellectual history, philology, and other modes of what we might call old historicism, but something like consensus prevailed for, in retrospect, a surprisingly long time. Deconstruction, as it was practiced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, represented an ambiguous moment. Like the New Criticism, it was concerned with tracing "subtle arrangements of words and images" in (primarily) literary texts. But deconstruction questioned basic premises of liberal humanism and the New Criticism, and it opened the way for political criticism of various kinds. New historicism developed that potential in a particular form.

Without insisting on causality (another principle Levine calls into question, along with periodization), we can observe that these disturbances in literary study coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and its pervasive impact on social life and cultural institutions, including the university. The period of Levine's professional formation is one MLA members know very well because we haven't seen the end of it: the era of declining literature enrollments, a shrinking PhD job market, "adjunctification," and ever-intensifying culture wars in and beyond the academy. The result of these and other factors has been to pressure literary study, over and over, to reestablish its methodological legitimacy and social relevance.

These large-scale conditions are in the background of the personal conflict Levine experienced in the process of gaining her PhD, a conflict that presented itself as an ethical choice between formalism and historicism. On the one side were dazzle, subtlety, and the pleasure of tracking words and images in texts; on the other, a career committed to righting social injustice. Although (or because?) conduct manuals seemed "dreary," studying them offered an ethically approvable way to do scholarship. But conduct manuals were not a solution to her conflict. Taking them up would mean putting aside too much of what had brought her to literary study in the first place.

Then Levine read Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. The effect was revelatory. The book "suggested to me for the first time that organizations and arrangements were the main means by which power worked: politics was a matter of imposing order on the world" (x). She would come to see these "organizations and arrangements" as "forms," and, as such, they were susceptible to the formal analysis she had been trained to apply to literature. She could work on questions of "power and injustice" and not give up her formalism. In fact, her formalism was precisely what was needed to deal with those questions. At a stroke, the authority of literary studies was shored up and its explanatory reach vastly enlarged.

Levine had discovered a magical solution to her conflict. Magical, because, faced with seemingly competing commitments, she had found a way not to choose between them and therefore to sacrifice nothing.

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Moreover, just what had been threatened by this conflict turned out to be the only tool needed to resolve it. Forms, from Levine's new perspective, were now not what "*distinguished* art objects from ordinary life" but what connected art and life in a more or less seamless unity. Forms could be found everywhere in "designed arrangements—deliberately crafted to impose order—just like art objects." What but literary formalism could be needed to study how power imposed order through "prison cells," "national boundaries," and "factory routines" (xi)?

The solution was magical in another sense too, as is clear throughout *Forms*, where Levine's forms, like Belinda's combs and Marx's table, are uncannily animated. In *Forms*, forms, not people, do things. The first thing they do is "impose order." But they also "run up against" other forms trying to impose order (7). Often Levine treats these intersections neutrally by saying that forms "meet" or "encounter" each other, like people in a coffee shop (8, 16). More often, however, forms compete and contend with each other. Levine's favored verb is "collide" (8). Collision replaces causality here and, with it, historical narratives like Marx's march of capital and class struggle. With respect to historical process, Levine admits no middle ground between "a single hegemonic system or dominant ideology" and an "aleatory" spectacle in which "a plurality of forms" collide (22, 7, 23). The collisions that she describes are discrete events as ungeneralizable as Brooks's lyric poems. They exhibit effects without intentions, also like Brooks's lyrics. There is a trace of purposiveness in her key term, "affordances," referring to the properties and potential uses of a given form: "Wood affords hard, durable structures. It does not afford fluid streams or spongy softness" (6, 9). But Levine's forms have wooden brains. They do not know what they do, beyond a blind will to "impose order."

Then again, when they act in ways Levine approves—indeed, in ways she would like to be seen as acting—forms appear intelligent and virtuous. Here she is on the intellectual capacities of the seminar room: "Capable of crossing disciplinary boundaries, encouraging critique and innovation, and prompting deliberately open-ended discussion about such confining wholes as convents and nation-states, the seminar room is a bounded, enclosed shape that sets out to disrupt other bounded, enclosed shapes" (48). Surely it is not the room that does these things but the people in it.

Someone might object that we know what Levine means in that sentence and various others like it. With a wooden table at the center of it, the seminar room is designed in a manner that supports styles of thought and exchange that can be put to progressive ends, with the twist that "a bounded, enclosed shape" turns out to be a conducive setting in which to analyze the role of similar shapes in oppressive ideologies of church and state and to that extent "disrupt" them.[2] But that's not what she says. There is a deep-seated literalism in her account of form, entailed by the way she attempts to combine political and aesthetic criticism. When the aim of the formalist critic is "to imagine workable, progressive, thoughtful relations among forms," social relations between people are replaced by relations between forms (xiii).

The idea of doing political work in the world by imagining "thoughtful relations among forms" is a disciplinary fantasy of empowerment that reflects the continuing crisis conditions of our profession and the resulting demand for literary scholarship to do more than it is commonly supposed to. A side effect is to minimize the activity and interest of literary authors. The word "intention" appears just a handful of times in *Forms* and then only to dismiss the concept, after Levine's initial mention of her father's humanist investment in it (ix). The people with agency

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in *Forms* are critics and theorists, including Levine, who frequently comes forward in the first person to manage her argument and inform us of the steps she is taking. Even historical actors she admires, such as "the nuns who embraced *clausura* and the Methodist activists who invoked the organizing principle of a global Christian fellowship," are "canny formalists" (39). Her heroes are readers styled in her image.

Levine's new formalism "builds on what literary critics have traditionally done best—reading for complex interrelationships and multiple, overlapping arrangements." Her concern is not with how we read but what we read: "I argue it is time to *export* those practices, to take our traditional skills to new objects—the social structures and institutions that are among the most crucial sites of political efficacy" (23). Levine calls for a fundamental reorientation of literary criticism that would nonetheless leave its fundamental methods intact. With *Bleak House*, she proposes "less to use formalist methods to read Dickens than to use Dickens to throw light on the operations of social form." She promises "literary criticism turned upside-down" (122).

But that is not what she produces. Dickens's novel demonstrates, she says, "the complexity and power of networked social experience" (123). She shows that each character in *Bleak House* acts as "a node in at least one distributed network, in which any point can connect to any other without needing to go through any central site or in any fixed order," and "almost all of the characters act in *more than one* different distributed network at a time" (125). This analysis is not literary criticism "turned upside-down." It is an incisive account of the system of social relations in a multiplot novel. Levine presents it as an example of how society is organized and functions in general, but we often read novels that way. She is describing how Dickens describes his world, which is what we always thought he did. She is using "our traditional skills" in a more or less traditional way to make a great novel freshly available and explain how its analytic power and continuing relevance inhere in its form. This makes her reading of *Bleak House* illuminating literary criticism.[3] That used to be, and it should be, saying a lot.

Notes

1. Laura Brown discusses Belinda's toilet in the context of British mercantile imperialism and connects Pope to Marx and commodity fetishism in *Alexander Pope* (8–28) and in *Ends of Empire* (119–20, 132).

2. The table was introduced to the seminar room in the United States in the late nineteenth century as part of the modernization of pedagogy and the development of the liberal arts curriculum.

3. Levine's related but more extended commentary on *The Wire* is similarly interesting and persuasive without turning criticism "upside-down." It is plausible to say *The Wire* performs the analytic work of "a formalist cultural studies" (132), but is that very different from saying it is a mimetic narrative that deploys its formal resources to anatomize the structures of a society and explore what it is like to live in it? That is one of the basic functions of novels, films, and TV series, and showing how those narrative forms work, to show how our world works, is one of the basic functions of criticism.

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