theories and methodologies

Weird Times

C. NAMWALI SERPELL

RECENTLY, SOME LITERARY CRITICS HAVE PROPOSED THAT WE MIGHT RELATE TO TEXTS IN A DIFFERENT WAY THAN WE'RE USED TO. INSTEAD of plunging into critique, plumbing a text's depths, or coolly analyzing its symptoms, instead of "digging down and standing back," as Rita Felski puts it, critics might adopt a less skeptical, less paranoid—less critical—stance. We might attend to a text's surfaces, in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's terms. We might get "close but not deep," as Heather Love suggests. We might practice a new formalism, neither naive nor nostalgic but keyed to the aesthetic and the political.

Lay reading already engages many of these practices. Ordinary readers and viewers accept that we identify with texts, form attachments to them, recognize ourselves in them. So this critical wave may be a shift more in mood than in method. By turning or returning to these ways of relating to literature and art, we might leave behind the sour, dour, gloomy doldrums of critique. We might become both more open to texts and more positive about them.

In *Uses of Literature,* Felski offers "recognition" as one form of ordinary and positive attention and links it to knowledge, acknowledgment, self-intensification, and self-extension (23). One of the earliest definitions of form, Plato's ideal, posits all knowledge as re-cognition—that is, knowing what we already know. Given the conservativism of his republic, it is not surprising that recognition is sometimes criticized as politically naive—isn't critique the literary critic's way of being vigilant and radical?

I think, as does Felski, that recognition is more complex. For instance, *déjà lu*, the sense of having already read something, rarely yields only smug self-confirmation. Because it is a process over time, recognition is seldom a static, exact moment of mirroring or matching up but rather an extended, shifty, inexact, and sometimes eerie relation between like forms.

As I read Caroline Levine's *Forms*, the sense of recognition I felt was accompanied by a range of affects. Some moments of recognition felt neutral or pleasurably uncanny, like the synchronicity

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r g Levine's book for three reasons. One, as above, I wish to complicate our association of postcritical reading with purely positive or naive affects. Two, Levine's text offers an occasion to meditate on the persistence of certain critical forms and how we acknowledge or resist them. Three, my uncanny, inconsistent, weird experience of recognizing *Forms* over time raises an alternative to how Levine treats "rhythm," her sole temporal form. Overall, my choice to discuss recognition rightly implies that I concur with much of the content of *Forms*, and I find the fissures and gaps in its forms productive. My engagement with the form of *Forms* at all, of course, concedes the argument of Levine's project as a whole.

My first moment of recognition in *Forms* arises with the introduction, "The Affordances of Form." Levine writes, "[T]o capture the complex operations of social and literary forms, I borrow the concept of *affordance* from design theory. *Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (6). In my 2014 monograph, I write, "To offer a specific vocabulary for my neo-phenomenology of reading in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, I borrow a concept from cognitive psychology: *affordance*" (*Seven Modes* 21).[1] Levine's capacious conception of form, "patterns of repetition and difference," allows her to analogize "designed arrangements" from prison cells to factory routines to national boundaries to literary texts (*Forms* 3, xi). I use the term *structures*, which coordinate operations of "sameness and difference" and afford aesthetic, affective, and ethical modes (*Seven Modes* 23).

The concept of affordance provides both of us with a conceptual bridge between literature and society, word and world—though Levine's analyses are cued to the political, mine to the ethical. Affordance is neither descriptive nor prescriptive but rather suggestive. As Levine says, "[A] reading practice that follows the affordances of both literary forms and material objects imagines these as mutually shaping potentialities, but does not fold one into the other, as if the materiality of the extratextual world were the ultimate determinant" (*Forms* 10). She critiques the usual causality whereby a literary form reflects "social structures" or is "epiphenomenal, growing out of social conditions that it mimics or opposes" (12).

Forms and *Seven Modes* take pains to resist the impulse to use mimesis as method—the tendency to read texts as reflections of the world. For example, in her examination of the

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form of the "whole" in chapter 1, Levine says her analysis will "invite us to reconsider the relations between literary forms and social containers as something other than reflective homologies" (40). In my work, I emphasize how often the ethics of form are at odds with the ethics in the content of my texts: "the moral dilemmas they recount in their story lines can be distinct from, or even counter to, the ethical resonance of their form" (*Seven Modes* 10).

As Levine puts it, literary forms do not simply "reflect or contain prior political realities"; rather, "aesthetic and political forms emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane" (*Forms* 16). By considering the modes that literary forms afford, I think of their relation to ethical experience as a resonance that "puts things into relation without presuming that they are derivative, causal, or isomorphic" (*Seven Modes* 26). Levine attends to how forms "add up to a complex environment composed of multiple and conflicting modes of organization—forms arranging and containing us, yes, but also competing and colliding and rerouting one another." She calls "not for the destruction of form but its multiplication" (*Forms* 16, 46). In *Seven Modes*, I propose a "commitment to variety" (in exempla, reading practices, modes of uncertainty) to shake up our mimetic approach to form and ethics (18).

While we choose different exempla—because of our different fields (hers, Victorian literature; mine, contemporary anglophone literature)—we both demonstrate our method through narrative. Levine writes, "The form that best captures the experience of colliding forms is narrative" because narratives "tend to present causality metonymically, through sequences of events, rather than by positing some original cause" (*Forms* 19). I, too, turn to narrative because it is steeped in time; novels "permit me to trace the modulation of uncertainty over a longer scale of time" than nonnarrative poetry would (*Seven Modes* 38).

Yet we both check this expansive and proliferative tendency in our work. Our (qualified) taxonomic inclinations are manifest in the uncannily similar ways that we organize our books. After an introduction laying out key terms and concepts, as exemplified by a brief reading of a passage from a canonical novel (she uses *Jane Eyre*; I use *Lolita*), we each proceed through a set of "common, pervasive . . . significant" forms or "old and widely recognizable structures" (*Seven Modes* 21). She concludes by bringing together her four forms—whole, rhythm, hierarchy, and network—in an analysis of HBO's *The Wire*. I conclude with a chapter about the copresence of three narrative structures of uncertainty in a novel published in 2005, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Our shared rhetorical tic of presenting lists of three or four suggests a desire to balance a sense of plenitude with the need for general, portable terms.

Some of these similarities can be attributed to a shared critical comportment: we have read similar theorists; my project, like hers, is formalist. And though my work is about uncertainty, which Levine feels we have exhausted as a topic, her readings in *Forms* in fact tend toward moments where forms collide, overlap, and disrupt one another in ways that afford uncertainty. It is more in name than in effect that Levine exhorts us to move beyond New Critical models like the one she describes in Cleanth Brooks's work: "The poem, like the liberal state, encourages plurality while also ultimately containing it" (30). I recognize in the shapely form of *Forms* the democratic ethos Levine sees lurking behind formalist methods, old and new: the effort to coordinate constraint with diversity.

I have just made a move that Levine often makes: using criticism as a case in point for an analysis of form. She uses this metarhetoric to distance her new formalism from New Criticism, new historicism, and decon-

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struction and to draw attention to how often critics rely on the forms they claim to want to shatter, disrupt, and so on. For instance, she notes that Mary Poovey's "rigorously historical" *Making a Social Body* (1995) "is itself organized by the single containing form that she criticizes: the concept of the social body. It is this idea that allows her to gather particular historical evidence and to arrange it so that we can grasp her argument" (33).

Despite Levine's savvy attention to the endurance of forms in academia—from the seminar room to periodization to geographic specialization—it's not always clear how her work fits these standard practices. Levine notes when her approach is "complementary" to earlier methods, but she often takes other scholars to task for those same methods (89). While reading *Forms*, I sometimes did a double take, then turned back to reread, trying to differentiate Levine's argument from those of the critics at whom she takes aim, deconstructive and New Critical scholars in particular. This is when my sense of recognition—of methods in her readings that Levine disavows in her claims—began to feel unsettling. It's odd to read a strong, even vehement, critique of a method only to find it being countered through the use of similar methods.

I also occasionally recognized critical concepts that Levine doesn't explicitly mention. Double take after double take: "Institutions are as much organized by rules and practices that need to be repeatedly reenacted as they are by containing walls" (58). *Is this Althusser?* "What if we understood literary texts not as unified but as inevitably plural in their forms—bringing together multiple ordering principles, both social and literary, in ways that do not and cannot repress their differences?" (40). *Is this Bakhtin?* "[D]espite their power to coerce and organize, rhythms, like bounded wholes, can be put to strategic ends" (52). *Is this Spivak's strategic essentialism?*

This last *déjà lu* felt the most troubling to me when, in another moment of metacritique, Gayatri Spivak herself becomes an object of study—through Bruce Robbins's reading of *Jane Eyre*. Levine writes, paraphrasing Robbins, "Spivak makes the case that the dark-skinned Caribbean-born Bertha must fall so that Jane may rise. . . . The narrative thus sacrifices the Third World woman for the sake of the First World protagonist" (107). Spivak becomes a "mediating figure, taking advantage of her class status and professional success to act as a powerfully critical voice on behalf of the Third World" (108). Or as Levine rephrases it: "no single hierarchy governs all the others, nor do they all work together successfully reinforcing Western imperialism, or the ruling class, or patriarchy. In fact, where two powerful hierarchies cross—bourgeoisie/proletariat and center/periphery—we find one of academia's most influential voices speaking on behalf of the global South" (109).

Even if we put aside the oddity of this comparison between Spivak and Bertha Mason—one that crosses class, race, culture, history, and the diegetic line—this moment hints at a potential blind spot in Levine's insistence on enduring forms. Only by virtue of a systemic and pervasive hierarchy in which people from the "Third World" and the "global South" are less prominent in academia are Spivak's "professional success" and influence even notable (108–09). That is, the condition of Spivak's disruptive success is the continued existence and dominance of the institutional forms it disrupts. Levine takes forms for granted, in part because she rightly wants us to acknowledge that we all do, but when the politics of these forms are laid out plainly, they are—perhaps inevitably—conservative.[2]

To take Levine's other examples: yes, perhaps *Jane Eyre* sketches out an alternative path in which the heroine chooses professional success as a colonial administrator with St. John Rivers; yes, perhaps when two women are hired by a corporation, they can form an alliance instead of pushing each other out; yes, perhaps Omar in *The Wire*

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"works the network . . . showing us that he understands well how both hierarchies and networks operate" (150). But these moments of triumph for figures who use the collision of forms to their political advantage are ways of working the system, negotiating within it. The system itself stays put. Jane could only have been a protoworking gal at the continued expense of colonized brown bodies. Forming an alliance at work is a kind of solidarity, but so is going on strike until companies hire more than two women at a time. Omar may be one of *The Wire*'s "epistemological and ethical exemplars"; he may "perform a reading of the social that is nothing other than a canny formalism" (149–50). He also gets shot in the head and dies. (Just another black man in Baltimore.)

The latent conservatism of *Forms* has less to do with Levine's politics and more to do with how Levine thinks about time. She contends that the disproportionate number of women who "opt for academic jobs as adjuncts and part-timers . . . does not result from an intention to keep women in their places; it is an unplanned collision of temporal forms, one biological and the other institutional" (8). But the conflict between a biological clock and a tenure clock is motivated, if not intentional. It relies on the facts that the tenure clock was developed with a male body as the standard for the profession and that we continue to prioritize it. Instead of strategically taking on part-time work with less pay and less job security, why not try to change the structure? Instead of form, why not reform?

It is clear from elsewhere in the book that Levine is committed to this sort of political change. But the thrust of her argument is that forms, though they may collide, endure. For Levine, time is an array of fixed forms or objects—biological clock, tenure clock—rather than a mode of or for change. Take Levine's list of what she calls the rhythms in an Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem: "the startling suddenness of death, the regularity of the tolling bell, the 'childhood's rest' cut short by the king's death, the meanwhile of a reciprocal relationship between queen and people, and the abrupt transfer of state power" (77). None of these temporal registers—regular, abrupt, ongoing, stayed—entails gradual change over time. In other words, they are types of time rather than processes in time.

What if Barrett Browning's meter is not only "one law among many others" but also a rhythm that changes, that sounds and feels different when we first encounter it in the first stanza and when we have grown used to it in the last stanza, not to mention when we reread or teach the poem (80)? What about rhythms other than disruption (event) or context (history)? What about the accretive, accelerative, darting, entangled, paradoxical effects of time? Repetition and difference do not just describe form, they also condition our experience of form in time. Further, as Jung, Freud, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and others have recognized, time—as it stutters, swerves, slips, steeps—reforms and deforms form, occasionally moving us toward radical political ends.

The piling up of forms, their collision, their mutual disruption—all of this feels curiously static in Levine's readings. Levine describes, for instance, how the sheer sprawl of networks in *Bleak House* resists totality and checks our sense of knowledge through a specific narrative technique: "[t]he suspense of the middle," which is "when a narrative clearly signals that it is holding something back." I recognize her description of the "hours and hours in the experience of uncertainty" we spend as we read *Bleak House*. I want to know what that experience is like. What does it afford? By the end of Dickens's novel, I agree, we recognize that "at any moment our knowledge of social interconnections can only be partial" (129). But what is the feeling of being in the midst of that suspended knowledge? Do we irritably search for connections, invent new

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ones, leap ahead or turn back to connect what seemed to resist connection?

Levine does not delve into *Bleak House*'s weird narrative form. She notes that Esther doesn't quite match forms of femininity; Esther also doesn't align with the usual forms of narration. *Bleak House* famously alternates between Esther's first-person, past-tense narration and an omniscient third-person, present-tense narration. (This formal innovation has not been an enduring form. It frankly still feels weird.) What does Dickens's alternation between these points of view over time afford when it comes to withheld knowledge? What does it afford when it comes to Levine's argument that Dickens rescripts characters as "moments in which complex and invisible social forces cross" (126)?

When we encounter Esther's first chapter, we take recourse to familiar forms. We might imagine that we will be with Esther for the rest of the novel—that Dickens's opening chapters serve merely as preface—or that *Bleak House* is a protomodernist or quasidramatic work and we will soon enter another character's point of view. But instead we return to the narrator a few chapters later and then again to Esther. Eventually a pattern of alternation is established, though it remains inconsistent in its timing and spacing. As we proceed, one affordance of the ongoing, occasional interpolation of Esther is an *unheimlich* ("uncanny") effect—*Bleak House* is, among other things, a Gothic novel—as we return home to her (sometimes to her literal hearth) amid a profusion of other characters. Another affordance is a distended, disrupted, tempered mode of identification. We never fully sink into Esther or the narrator. Recognition becomes skittish, jumpy, hesitant.

The combination of these distinct narratorial forms is, per Levine, a "clash of temporal forms," but it is also an increasingly familiar yet continually imbalanced pattern, like a 5/4 rhythm (8). This rhythm significantly transforms the novel's Aristotelian anagnorisis. Levine interprets that moment of recognition as follows:

> Esther and Lady Dedlock first appear as two distant points, only gradually brought together as linked nodes in the consciousness of both readers and characters. By beginning with a social and geographical gap between two people who are ignorant of one another's existence, Dickens exposes not so much the splitting apart of families *by* networks but families *as networks*, in which the nodes are not always already fused together, but rather connected by paths that can be interrupted and stretched by other forms. (128)

I recognize this analysis; it feels right. But where it does not fit my experience—where there is a gap between our readings that is as productive as it is distancing—is in its leap over the time between the first appearances of those two women and their eventual connection. Levine, again, does not dwell in the gradual, the interrupted, the stretched times she describes. They become temporal facts to support a claim. I see them instead as weird times that render Dickens's mother-daughter relationship stranger than a disrupted network, something more akin to an experience of off-kilter synchronicity, a meaningful, acausal, occasional simultaneity.

If at times my sense of recognition when reading *Forms* afforded a sense of solidarity, at other times it afforded this kind of discontinuity, one equally valuable for what those misalignments sparked. I often found myself thinking of weird forms and times that fall outside the purview of Levine's otherwise bracingly comprehensive categories, not because they are formless or uncommon, but because they are weirder than (even combinations of) wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks.

Levine mentions Martin Munro's work on Afro-diasporic time—"repetitive, cyclical, polyrhythmic, and dialogic" (49). This allusion made me wonder about the forms

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of Black Twitter and the seven-second stricture of *Vine* and its posthumous screen captures (RIP *Vine*). At times, my mind drifted toward H. P. Lovecraft's alien architecture—"it moved anomalously in a diagonal way"; "an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse"—and actions: "A mountain walked or stumbled. God!" (167). How would we describe the "wholeness," in Levine's terms (*Forms* 24), of the alien substrate in Jonathan Glazer's 2014 film *Under the Skin*, a material at once familiar and terrifying, solid and liquid, black and clear, embryonic and embalming?

These weird forms move through space and time in discomfiting and inconsistent ways. They neither conform nor clash, neither endure nor disrupt. They are all over the political spectrum; they are hard to work within, strategically speaking, but they are undeniably fraught with racial and gender politics. It is not surprising that they don't fit in a book as clean, clear, sound, and structured—as beautifully formed—as Levine's *Forms*. But they occurred to me while reading it precisely because Levine's rigorous descriptive taxonomy covers almost everything else. *Forms*, perhaps unwittingly, affords these thought experiments, not through its portable terms for enduring forms, nor through its political optimism about them, but through the shadows cast by those forms that it cannot quite recognize.

Notes

1. I begin with the definition of *affordance* used by the cognitive psychologist James Gibson. Levine finds Donald Norman's definition more useful. To be clear, this is a claim not for priority but for the near simultaneous emergence of resonant methods. I first used the concept in my 2008 dissertation (*Ethics*). Levine first used it in "Narrative Networks." Neither of us is the first to use this concept in literary theory—Gibson's wife, Eleanor Gibson, wrote a collection of essays on the topic in 1975.

2. Levine notes that Carolyn Lesjak makes a similar argument against this version of formalism "because she sees it as a recipe for political quietism" (*Forms* 18).

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