the changing profession

What Is New Formalism?

MARJORIE LEVINSON

THIS REVIEW OF NEW FORMALISM POSES CHALLENGES VERY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF THE FAMILIAR COMPENDIUM-REVIEW GENRE (e.g., "The Year's Work in Victorian Studies"). While all review essays face questions of inclusion, in an assignment of this kind, where the defining category is neither an established period nor topic but a developing theory or method emerging from the entire repertoire of literary and cultural studies, identifying the scholarly literature is a critical task in its own right. Moreover, because new formalism is better described as a movement than a theory or method, the work of selection is especially vexed and consequential. It is vexed because the practitioners' modes and degrees of identification with the movement are so various, and consequential because the reviewer's bibliographic decisions cannot help but construct the phenomenon being described.

My original version of this essay, which far exceeds the five thousand words alloted by *PMLA*, does a reasonable job of representing post-2000 scholarship that lays claim to a resurgent formalism while offering some commentary on pre-2000 studies that are clearly inaugural documents, often cited as such by later new formalism. That version also includes three informational appendixes referencing topically related bodies of scholarship and a brief publication chronology of new formalism.[1] I urge the reader to consult that longer text (available online at sitemaker.umich.edu/pmla_article) for its attention to the two monographs that, in my view, make the most powerful historical and theoretical interventions—Jonathan Loesberg's *A Return to the Aesthetic* and Isobel Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic*—and for its discussion of an article that I find exemplary of a genuinely new formalism in action, Robert Kaufman's "Everybody Hates Kant: Blakean Formalism and the Symmetries of Laura Moriarty." My selection of texts for this unavoidably truncated print version is guided by my sense of what is likely to be most useful to graduate students whose knowledge of formalism is limited not only to hearsay but to highly partisan hearsay, pro and con.

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All the studies treated here and in my full text aim to recover for teaching and scholarship in English some version of their traditional address to aesthetic form. While they all situate themselves in relation to "the radical transformation of literary study that has taken place over the last decade" (Levine 1), their narrative of that transformation divides along a single axis: the conception, role, and importance of form in new historicism. (In many of these essays, *new historicism* serves as a catch-all term for cultural studies; contextual critique; ideology critique; Foucauldian analysis; political, intersectional, and special-interest criticism; suspicion hermeneutics; and theory. This is regrettable.) About a quarter of the studies trace the discipline's neglect of form to new historicism's alleged denunciation of form as an ideological mystification. The remaining studies see the eclipse of form as an unfortunate by-product of the institutional authority enjoyed by the historical turn. They worry that success has bred facility, stripping the method of both the complexity and the textual engagement evident in its early instances.

The above distinction between two strains of new formalism translates into a practical division between (a) those who want to restore to today's reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form (traced by these critics to sources foundational for materialist critique—e.g., Hegel, Marx, Freud, Adorno, Althusser, Jameson) and (b) those who campaign to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form (regarded as the condition of aesthetic experience as traced to Kant—i.e., disinterested, autotelic, playful, pleasurable, consensus-generating, and therefore both individually liberating and conducive to affective social cohesion) the prerogative of art. In short, we have a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism and a backlash new formalism.

Borrowing from Susan Wolfson, I call the first kind of practice "activist formalism" (2), and, for want of a better phrase, I call the second kind "normative formalism," not because it achieves normative status but because it assigns to the aesthetic norm-setting work that is cognitive and affective and therefore also cultural-political. An analytic description of these groups would foreground the dialectical model of the artwork assumed or explained by critics of the first group (a model of dynamic self-negation) as compared to the Aristotelian model (stable and generically expressive self-identity) underwriting normative formalism.

A common complaint among activist formalists is that their normative counterparts derail the project of cultivating "an historically informed formalist criticism" (Breslin xiv), one that would lead to "an adequate materialist understanding of formal values" (Keach 221). Ellen Rooney speaks for the activist strain in arguing "that the return to formalism is a development of the very trends that some of the 'New Formalists' currently at work seem intent on reversing" (18), as does J. Paul Hunter, who worries the "double legacy" of new formalism—"a product of rightest assumptions now engaged by leftist agendas" (111). These critics warn that "if a longing for the lost unities of bygone forms . . . is the impetus of a new formalism, the chances are not good for what is already an . . . urgent project: the revision and reanimation of form in the age of interdisciplinarity" (Rooney 25). Although activist formalists want to recover the formal dimension of all the materials that enter into today's scholarship, they strongly insist that works of literature (by whatever means they came to achieve that status) provide invaluable opportunities for formalist attention. (Note: these critics do not equate form with literariness.) As William Keach says:

> [T]here is every reason to hold onto the "aesthetic" and the "poetic" as historically specific conceptualizations of great value, as urgent and contradictory discourses in which the effort to value formal design—or accident . . . generates problems that haven't been fully

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> resolved in our own attempts to escape from ideology into "theory" or "science." (219–20)

Keach's careful diction (e.g., "conceptualizations," "contradictory," "effort") mounts an argument in miniature.

Predictably, normative new formalism assigns to literature a special kind or concept of form, one that is responsible for a work's accession to literary status in the first place and that remains an integral property of the work. As Rooney explains, "a call to honor form" is the "vehicle of a narrower project, a defense of the literary" (25), taken by normative formalists to be an endangered species. Through its formal address, literature is said to solicit a set of responses that work to enhance and sustain our humanness, which in these essays is equated with our susceptibility to pleasure, our somatic self-awareness, our sense of shared humanness, our sense of wonder, our awareness of "the non-centrality of the subject-position" (Koppen 802), and so forth, achievements under siege by the collective forces of modernity and by the more restricted ranks of new historicists.

Both kinds of new formalism seek to reinstate close reading both at the curricular center of our discipline and as the opening move, preliminary to any kind of critical consideration. Reading, understood in traditional terms as multilayered and integrative responsiveness to every element of the textual dimension, quite simply produces the basic materials that form the subject matter of even the most historical of investigations. Absent this, we are reading something of our own untrammeled invention, inevitably less complex than the products of reading. That complexity (a leitmotif throughout new formalism), which is attributed to the artwork and recoverable only through a learned submission to its myriad textual prompts, explains the deep challenge that the artwork poses to ideology, or to the flattening, routinizing, absorptive effects associated with ideological regimes.[2]

Thus, yet another feature marking new formalism as a whole: reassertion of the critical (and self-critical) agency of which artworks are capable when and only when they are (a) restored to their original, compositional complexity (the position of normative new formalism) or (b) for the activist camp, when they are released from the closures they have suffered through a combination of their own idealizing impulses, their official receptions, and general processes of cultural absorption.

For a formal description—one that would say what kind of thing, action, or event new formalism is rather than, as above, speak to its content—I reiterate my opening characterization of new formalism as a movement rather than a theory or method. I do so out of respect for the pragmatic concerns uppermost in every one of the essays examined, concerns about the state of our pedagogy, our scholarship, our literary inheritance, and our democratic institutions, seen to be deprived of a crucial element in ethical subject formation by the transformation of literary studies into sociohistorical study over the past twenty years. The negative reasons for denying new formalism the status of a theory or methodology are, first, that none of the essays develops a critique of either the premises or the defining practices of historical reading. Overwhelmingly, the argument is with the institutional monopoly enjoyed by certain assumptions and "routines" (Soderholm 2) or with latter-day practices of historical reading that have either forgotten or never grasped the centrality of form to contextualist and materialist critique. One cannot help noticing the striking agreement to exempt by name the founding figures of historicist critique from the charge of reductiveness while maintaining the anonymity of those hapless "followers" and mere practitioners (Levine 2), those "less careful and subtle critics" (Clark 9), who *are* held accountable for the sorry state of our criticism. On one reading, this pattern suggests the movement's fear of taking on the giants as well as its retreat

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from close critical engagement with historicist readings; on another, thus does new formalism enact its rejection of new historicism's rebarbative strain. On a third, suggested by my colleague Gregg Crane, normative new formalism's claim that contextual reading sets its face against the pleasures of the text falls flat when tested against the likes of Stephen Greenblatt and Jerome McGann.

Within activist new formalism, and often in the normative strain as well (though it would likely reject the following terminology), the common cry is that we no longer attend to the processes and structures of mediation through which particular discourses and whole classes of discourse (literary genres, for example) come to represent the real, in the same stroke helping establish that empirical domain *as* the real, a process that entails the eclipse or exclusion of other contenders for that title. Instead, we have come to treat artworks as "bundles of historical and cultural content," a simpleminded mimesis replacing the dynamic formalism that characterized early new historicism, a way of reading that insisted on the unique interdetermination of form and content for every work studied (Rasmussen 1). Moreover (I borrow from Richard Strier's work of recovery), W. V. Quine's once crucial distinction between "use" and "mention" has vanished, giving rise to a situation where "[t]he fact that some item . . . is mentioned in a text . . . is sufficient to get the machinery of 'archeology' and archive-churning going" (213). In other words, the determination of a work's content no longer forms a part of the critical process. We have forgotten, in short, that the material "gets to count as material in the first place by virtue of its relationship to an act . . . of framing, an act of form" and that "the formal gets to be formal only by its momentary, experimental coincidence with the material" (Kaufman 135).

Because new formalism's argument is with prestige and praxis, not grounding principles, one finds in the literature (I treat the exceptions in my full text online) no efforts to retheorize art, culture, knowledge, value, or even—and this *is* a surprise—form. That form is either "the" or "a" source of pleasure, ethical education, and critical power is a view shared by all the new formalism essays. Further, all agree that something has gone missing and that the something in question is best conceived as attention to form (Wolfson 9). But despite the proliferation in these essays of synonyms for *form* (e.g., *genre*, *style*, *reading*, *literature*, *significant literature*, *the aesthetic*, *coherence*, *autonomy*), none of the essays puts redefinition front and center. I have more to say about this below.

Neither can we cite the development of new critical methods as the driving force behind new formalism. These essays promote either a methodological pluralism or advise the recovery of one particular method, sidelined or disparaged in current critical practice. Some candidates for reinvestiture are New Criticism, Burkean performativity, Frankfurt school dialectics, and Crocean appreciation.

The central work of the movement as a whole is rededication, a word I choose because new formalism seeks not only to reinstate the problematic of form so as to recover values forgotten, rejected, or vulgarized as the direct or indirect consequence of new historicism's dominance but also to generate commitment to and community around the idea of form. The language of "commitment," "conviction," "devotion," "dedication" is frequent and often focal in these essays, and it points up the advocacy slant of the movement as well as its emphasis on affect, a recoil from what is cast as the arid rationalism ("scholastic" is the term one critic uses [Soderholm 2]) of the theoretically informed historicisms and from both the positivist and the antiquarian strains of historicism now abroad, with their alleged indifference to the cognitive and political dimensions of feeling. It is worth pondering this accusation in the light of the prominence of history-of-affect studies

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over the past ten years, all of them challenging the seemingly transparent but in fact historically specific distinction between feeling and knowing. These historicist studies make it their business very precisely to restore the cognitive and collective work of feeling as well as feeling's inescapable embodiment.[3]

On this point, let me note that normative new formalism makes a strong claim for bringing back pleasure as what hooks us on and rewards us for reading. Some sample statements to this effect include Wolfson, who pitches "a sophisticated yet unembarrassed sense of literary value—and pleasure" (7); Denis Donoghue, who writes, "He [Paul de Man] was a remarkably close reader but he did not read in the interests of a poem or a novel. Or in the interests of his own pleasure" (16); Charles Altieri, who insists that "students must experience the reading of poetry as sensuous indulgence that turns into the delights of staging ourselves as different identities" (262); George Levine, who celebrates "the almost mindless physicality" of aesthetic engagement, barring which, students will stop joining the ranks of professional critics (4); James Soderholm, who makes his homage to art by disparaging theory that is "removed from both the pain and pleasure of human experience in its harrowing, earthy particularity" (7). Normative new formalism holds that to contextualize aesthetic experience is to expose its hedonic dimension as an illusion, distraction, or trap. It is hard not to hear in this worry a variant of the classic freshman complaint that analyzing literature destroys the experience of it.

This brings me back to the curious fact noted above—that, despite its advocacy rhetoric, new formalism does not advocate *for* any particular theory, method, or scholarly practice. I use Wolfson's characterization of the essays in her guest-edited *Modern Language Quarterly* issue as representative: "The readings for form that follow . . . show, if not consensus about what form means, covers, and implies, then a conviction of why it still has to matter" (9). What, we might ask, is a shared commitment minus articulated agreement about the object to which one commits? When the question is framed in this way, we see the answer at once: namely, the aesthetic, on the Kantian reading so often invoked (erroneously, according to Loesberg, *Return*) in these essays. In other words, one could construe new formalism as itself a kind of aesthetic or formal commitment. It seeks to fend off the divisiveness encouraged by the kinds of cognitive, ethical, and juridical commitments—as it were, content commitments—rife among and effectively defining all the critical practices summed up by the term *new historicism*, commitments that paradoxically (so new formalism argues) rob our scholarship of its potential for emancipatory and critical agency. As Heather Dubrow both shows and tells, new formalism at its best demonstrates a renewed seriousness of address to Enlightenment concepts and practices of critique: specifically, Enlightenment's demand for scrupulous attention to the formal means that establish the conditions of possibility for experience—textual, aesthetic, and every other kind. At its worst, new formalism exacerbates the disease it seeks to cure: adversative, sectarian, programmatic, and instrumental reading, geared toward the shaping or sustaining of the liberal bourgeois subject—the autonomous, self-transparent, complex but not conflicted subject (see n2). New formalism is a very mixed bag.

New-formalist work concentrates in the areas of early modern and Romantic period study both for tactical reasons (these are the disciplinary sectors where new historicism arose and where its methods remain most entrenched) and for the substantive reasons behind that fact: for example, the special institutional inscription of those periods based on, among other things, the prominence of poetry in general and of the lyric more specifically; the new languages of interiority and introspection crafted by those literatures; the

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new figuration of the aesthetic as a unique experiential, cognitive, affective, and ethical domain; and of course the canonical prestige of those periods (early modern and what Isobel Armstrong has recently named "antemodern" or early modern*ist* [280]) and, as their different but related modernities suggest, their bearing on our own self-definition.

For histories of the career of form and formalism in the academy and with respect to other critical values and methodologies (and sometimes larger cultural movements), see Douglas Bruster; Michael Clark; Stephen Cohen; Loesberg ("Cultural Studies"); Mark David Rasmussen; Rooney; Soderholm; and Wolfson. Rather than proceed essay by essay, I list some common features and themes of these chiefly historicizing essays.

With remarkable regularity, one reads that New Criticism was more historical and more activist in its notions of form than reputation has it and that new historicism's notion of form was both more formalist and more agential in its working ideas of form than current practice suggests. In other words, the sharp antithesis between the two isms falsifies them both. Theodor Adorno surfaces over and over again in these essays as the lost leader of new historicism linked variously with Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, Fredric Jameson, and T. J. Clark and as the bridge to a *new* (activist) formalism. Another commonality, one that is more an assumption than a theme, is the concept of literary form "as productive rather than merely reflective"—again, an activist, or what Jameson called a dynamic, notion of form (Cohen 23), which, in the work of the normative formalists, takes on a broadly pedagogical, humanizing cast (reviving Schiller's model of aesthetic education). Nearly all these histories target the abuses rather than paradigmatic uses of new historicism: for example, "What began as a provocative mode of inquiry now seems to be a set of routines . . ." (Soderholm 2). Similarly, either embedded or argued in a number of these essays is the analogy between the artwork's putative or ideally "autotelic coherence" (Clark 2) and the "philosophical foundation of Western humanism as . . . derived from a Kantian faith in the constitutive power of symbolic categories in general." As deconstruction attacked the "integrity" of the text and the "entire system of values and intellectual practices associated with that text as 'literature,'" and as literary language lost its specificity, "critics turned . . . to the extra-literary and even extra-discursive forces at work in society at large" (3). Much of this work argues that the way out of this game of diminishing returns is to stop defining form as inherently totalizing, seeing it rather as "a power to complicate that is also a power to undermine" (11).[4] This move leads to a "reinvigorated formalism" (Rooney 27 [Adorno is the prototype]) of the sort promoted here.

Some minor criticisms of this very instructive body of work are, first, that it might have focused a little less exclusively on the trajectory New Criticism → structuralism → deconstruction → new historicism → poststructuralism so as to introduce students to a wider array of formalisms: Russian formalism; Aristotelian and Chicago school formalism; the culturally philological formalism of Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer; the singular projects of William Empson, F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards, Northrop Frye, Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth. Readers would also have profited from some discussion of the received meaning of formalism in twentieth-century theory and history of art and music. Finally, greater precision in the use of such near-cognate terms as *formal*/*formalist* and *the aesthetic* / *literature* would have advanced the good work accomplished by these learned and judicious essays.

Altieri tells a kind of story different from the other histories, one as interesting as it is openly interested. He argues that New Criticism, in preferring the model of text to that of action, made a rhetorical misstep with grave conceptual consequences. "[F]orced into a language of 'organic form'" that was unable to

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accommodate "the range of human interests that generate efforts at lyric expression" (259), New Criticism invited its immediate successors to posit a model of value and knowledge specific to the literary and based on the artwork's "ability to carry 'non-discursive truths' that opposed science's 'mere' ability to develop and test discursive hypotheses." Thus arose thematic criticism, of a kind "where the allegory necessary for a knowledge claim" about the text could not be correlated with the text's "performative energies." The general frustration with New Criticism's and thematic criticism's failure to provide a workable definition of literary knowledge drove the profession toward "an idealized social criticism, where one actually could make knowledge claims about texts, if only in terms of their relationships to contexts" (260).

In forging its governing conceit (Altieri does not say what compulsion "forced" a language of organic form), New Criticism short-circuited what might have become a genuine critique of "the epistemic priorities driving Enlightenment modernity" (260). Having identified the error, Altieri wants to proceed more robustly on New Criticism's original course: its goal of developing a definition of lyric that "locate[s] actual positive alternatives to Enlightenment priorities" and that is organized around "conative" rather than cognitive values (279, 261). Like Armstrong and Loesberg, but without their internally differentiated reappraisals of Enlightenment positions, Altieri sets the ideal of a "non-epistemic stance for theorizing about poetry" (261), a stance rooted in such "*prima facie*" values (267) as pleasure, identification, articulateness, imaginative projection. If we can abandon any kind of truth or knowledge claim as a "workable ideal" for literature, our reward will be "poems [that] provide structures we can point to as the grounds for our taking certain dispositions as valuable without our having to derive the value by a chain of arguments" (260, 267). To explain our "disposition," all we need do is show that the reason we value that particular value is that "we trust in or revel in some state or find ourselves able to relate differently to our surroundings and other persons" (267, 268). Altieri concludes in ringing Paterian peroration, attacking "debunkers of poetry" for depriving students of knowing "what is involved in feeling one's body so intensely and so complexly that one has to reach out beyond it to imaginary extensions of those states, for the sake simply of who they make us become during the moments that we can make them last" (278).

Altieri's argument rests on the supposedly self-evident distinction between language used for realization (what Altieri calls "voicing," or the performative, projective, empathic potentials of poetry) and language used as representation (he means discursive, propositional statement). Surely he would not maintain that the two are mutually exclusive, not unless he is arguing for the most reductively mimetic view of representation and the most idealized, subjectivist, and transcendental notion of realization.

Jonathan Loesberg's 1999 article in *Victorian Literature and Culture* strikes a bracing and provocative note. Welcoming rather than denying the "potential partiality of formalism" ("Cultural Studies" 537), Loesberg endorses "the temporary acceptance of disciplinary enclosure"—an act of "voluntary askesis" (541)—in the interest of combating the "intellectual imperialism" of cultural studies (540). Offering a pragmatic argument in the vein of John Dewey, Stanley Fish, and Richard Rorty, Loesberg emphasizes the willfulness of the turn he espouses, as opposed to any kind of "consequential claim" for the return to formalism (541). He urges a formalism predicated not on "empirical accuracy" (e.g., a better description of the artwork) but on the "particular freeing [of] perspective that formal analysis allows" (544). In point of fact, Loesberg's pragmatism is not as extreme, nor is his relativism as radical, as it can sound.

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In a stunning move (reminiscent of Liu's 1989 essay), he points up "the dependence of historicism and cultural studies on the aesthetic formalism those theories claim to break out of" and then mines those resources ("Victorian writers . . . concerned with aesthetics") for critical ideas and methods (541). As a prime exhibit of this dependence, Loesberg launches a brilliant rereading of Michel Foucault, which forms chapter 3 of his book.

I treat of Richard Strier's very short essay at very great length because it develops a number of analytic and positional distinctions everywhere at work in new formalism but laid out for view only by Strier. Both this essay and W. J. T. Mitchell's take pains to undo the monolithic picture of formalism, which is in large part responsible for its recent fate. Moreover, in a field overrun with passions and more prone to clump than sift, these careful and thoughtful critics should serve as role models.

Strier makes two important moves. First, he revisits what most readers regard as the least redeemable of formalisms, that of Cleanth Brooks, noting the dependence of Brooks's formalist readings on his knowledge of historical context, a knowledge so thoroughly assumed as critical prerequisite that Brooks doesn't bother mentioning it. Strier also retrieves for us Brooks's clear statement that the critic can "make a return on his debt to the historian" in that "the results of formalist analysis may themselves be data for historical understanding" (210). Ergo, even the most doctrinaire (by reputation) of formalisms always included and acknowledged historicism, going so far as to avow formalism's service to historicism.

To flesh out this view of a historically informed and informing formalism, Strier takes us from Brooks's to Auerbach's formalism. Auerbach's (and, one would add, Spitzer's), premise is that "formal features of a text, matters of style, can be indices to large intellectual and cultural matters" (211). Strier labels this kind of formalism "indexical" as distinct from "aesthetic." (All the essays treated above—Altieri's excepted—share the indexical view of the artwork, and many would trace the indexing effect to the artwork's dialectical situation and therefore structure.)

Drawing another excellent distinction, Strier shows the bearing of the above discussion on two separate strains of new historicism. On the one hand, there is a *new* historicism, "new" because unlike the historicism of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and also of early-twentieth-century Anglo-American contextualism, it drives context into text, world into work, thus delivering up form—the unique way that each artwork tries to make symbolic what experience has suggested as actual—as the privileged analytic object, exposing history in tension with ideology. *New* historicists focus on form as the revelation of ideology and its closures disrupted by their unspeakable conditions of historical being (unspeakable not because of their transcendence, of course, but because they determine the conditions of thought and feeling—i.e., the conditions of speech).

By contrast, new *historicism* flatly refuses the meaningfulness of form, of the aesthetic, and of literature except as mystification; it will not credit, much less explore, the reality of that institutional and phenomenological appearance. In Myra Jehlen's words, it "reduces literary fictions to historical lies" (41), or, following Strier, it "treat[s] passages almost entirely in terms of content" (213). New *historicism* has no choice but to treat form in this way so long as it conceives of form as organic and totalizing, a fantasy machinery for converting fact into symbol, leaving no remainder and showing no marks of labor.

Strier's *new* historicism sounds very like his indexical formalism. What distinguishes them? To get at this, Strier brings on a final and, again, wonderfully illuminating distinction, cited above: Quine's *use* versus *mention*. An indexical-philological formalism addresses the uses to which details in both literary and nonliterary texts (following René Wellek,

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"monuments" and "documents") are put, with this caveat: that the work itself provide the initial context for grasping the significance of those details. Details that are not put to use in this fashion—not, as we say, motivated by the work—are mentions, and it is new historicism's interest in these that sets it apart from the Auerbach-Spitzer model. Moreover, "the object of such study is not literature but some aspect of a culture in general" (213). My hunch is that Strier would distinguish the *new* historicist from the indexical formalist according to how the critic construes "putting to use" or "giving significance." For Auerbach *or* Brooks, a detail becomes a use if it supports the governing intention or overall effect of the work considered as an instance of literature, a literary kind, or a formal or stylistic subset of that kind. The detail's support can, of course, be in the mode of qualifying, ironizing, or even contradicting that intention, when the contradicting occurs through formal or structural devices having their own textual legitimacy. Conversely, for *new* historicism, mention becomes use when the detail, by interrupting the artwork's culturally imposed or assimilated boundaries—its self-representation as a distinct form, genre, and categorically literary instance—identifies the larger, extraliterary systems or wholes that suggest why or under what conditions the work came into being in the first place. That is, mention becomes use when the detail gives notice of that which motivates the work as an "eventual" whole.

Strier's array of distinctions is not offered as a decision tree funneling to an ineluctable best practice. Rather, it crafts a vocabulary for framing the big questions, the kind that many new formalists want to ask. For example, do we want to consider a specifically "literary approach [as] valuable and worthwhile—both 'in itself' and in relation to the whole world of texts, including documents" (213)? Strier answers yes, citing persuasive instances from his own practice and generalizing by reference to a claim that dissolves the cognitive-conative binary: "The level of style and syntax is the level of 'lived' experience" (212). Although the phrase resonates with the authenticity jargons of the normative formalists (Charles Altieri, Denis Donoghue, Ihab Hassan, Virgil Nemoianu, James Soderholm), Strier's argument pulls it into the force field of Foucault's "ways of living," which collapses the binaries of truth of fact versus truth of feeling and realization versus representation, instead of recruiting those binaries to justify the deeper-or-other-than-truth claims of the aesthetic.

Having explored why it is worthwhile to subject documents to formalist approaches, Strier puts a harder question: do we want to give up on "the individual literary work as a significant object of study" (213)? Although he closes on that questioning note, he inscribes an answer in his opening distinction between, on the one hand, an echt or naive formalism, projecting perfect adequation of language to world, intention to meaning, and, on the other, a formalism (by reference to the naive strain, let's call this one sentimental) that casts the form-content, signifier-signified-referent relation as one of slippage, erasure, noncoincidence, and remainder. No, we do not want to give up on the individual literary work as object of study, because as a unit of analysis, a posit of significant form, it so powerfully stages the tension between those two formalisms, the naive and sentimental, the organic and artifactual, the necessary and contingent. It gives us unique access to the dynamic historical formation that inhabits the still form of form itself.

Like Strier, Mitchell disaggregates the idealist, organicist notion of form as governed by inner necessities from structuralism's notion of form as artificially "constructed" and thus (I'm not clear on the logical relation Mitchell intends here) subordinated to its structural place and function (321–22). Unlike form, structure "has value only in relation to the end it serves" in an analytically recoverable system. Defined as "the *manner* in which some-

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thing is done," inscribed in the work as "a spatial or temporal pattern," structure invites the reader to do something as well—namely, to "re- or deconstruc[t] it" (322). Because both writer's and reader's manners of doing are to some extent overdetermined by the systems in which they occur, structure always includes a historical element. Clearly, the critical question for this structuralist account of form is how to decide which to do, re- or deconstruct it. Although Mitchell does not take up this question, the thrust of his essay is to rule out any conceptually or axiomatically derived answer, pointing us rather to a pragmatic or situationist (in Sartre's sense) decision.

To get at our own situation, Mitchell returns to Adorno. In what becomes the central move of the essay, he summons up Adorno's distinction between "committed" (or "tendency") artworks and "autonomous" artworks. The former "credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease," whereas the latter offer "a salutary negation of the empirical reality [they] wan[t] to contest." Autonomous art does not "*express*" commitment; rather, by "*regroup[ing]*" the elements of empirical reality according to its own laws, the artwork instantiates and effectuates commitment, commitment not to an agenda but to the project of radically reorganizing perception, propaedeutic to social change (322; my emphases).

I would point out a readerly prerequisite implied in Mitchell's account: in order to detect the work of form (to respond, that is, to the work's cognitive regrouping), readers must first grasp the presence of "empirical reality" (the hegemonic or transparent version of the real) both inside and in tension with the formal design of the work. In other words, Adorno's model of autonomous art presupposes a partnership with dialectical critique, not necessarily developed as such but present as an awareness of difference in identity. Absent that awareness, art-*work* becomes *Art*, no matter how autonomous, how uncompromising, its negation of "brute fact" and identitarian thinking. (Adorno's formalism sets its face against a notion—he would say "fetish"—of form as an inherent as opposed to interactional or historically contingent property of the work.)

Mitchell adds a new distinction to those drawn from Adorno: "making a commitment" (Adorno's "tendency" writing) versus "being committed." Whereas the former is a state "constructed voluntarily," the latter is something we discover "we were already . . . without being aware of it." In the latter way, Mitchell writes, we are still committed to formalism, and it is precisely this way that he commends (323). He commends it moreover—consistently with the position taken—by the style of his own critical reflections. His essay is dense and difficult, the logic of its transitions often elliptical. Mitchell uses this (for him, atypical) argumentative form to underscore the presence of form—his own manner of doing—and, more important, to highlight the analogy with Adorno's "autonomous" art. By his own procedures, he shows what an autonomous work of *criticism* might look like. Instead of encouraging or even permitting commitment to an agenda or ideal, he seeks to "activat[e] thought" by the very form of his critical reflection (322). All the activist new formalists worry the potential of their essays to sponsor a new dogma; only Mitchell, by defending his argument at the level of form, not statement, takes practical measures to prevent this co-optation.

Wolfson's introduction to the *Modern Language Quarterly*'s special issue on new formalism offers a nuanced account of new historicism, which she terms "the most powerful form-attentive criticism in the post- (and anti-) New Critical climate." "To read for form," she writes, "was to read against formalism" (3). As evidence of this practice, which "resist[ed] the isolationist formal*ism* of early-century modernism" (6) and which links the politics of liberation to form, she names a veritable pantheon of Marxist critics. Georg Lukács, for example,

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in arguing that the truly social element in literature is the form, rejected the content-dominated methods of the old historicism along with the dictates of social realism. Although Wolfson's aim in citing these figures is to rehabilitate New Criticism (long associated with a conservative agrarian and isolationist political stance) by pointing up its activist origins and its affinity with "form-attentive" new historicism, the effect of her nice deconstruction is to weaken her claim that "the conceptual agency of form" needs urgent defense (15). A careful reading of her essay suggests that she is instead calling for a more form-attentive reading of new historicism, a reading that discriminates early and late, complex and reductive, positivist and dialectical, antiquarian and archival. She does a marvelous job of showing younger scholars that respect for Marxist and historicist critique by no means entails derogating the formal dimension.

In closing, let me cite a very different kind of essay, Elizabeth Harris Sagaser's "Flirting with Eternity: Teaching Form and Meter in a Renaissance Poetry Course." The excellence of this essay is in its hands-on approach to the problem of helping students address "basic questions such as why—politically, philosophically, psychologically—a culture would develop form and meter so intensely" without lapsing into an alienating technicalism (185). Because hers is a rigorously interactive notion of form ("form and meter only exist in practice—in reciting verse, listening to it, reading it, writing it, remembering it, teaching it" [186]), she designs exercises (recitation, memorization, etc.) to counteract the reification effects of contemporary print and academic culture. Even as she stresses the acoustic, she quotes Maurice Blanchot, whose sense of "the materiality of language" is tactile and visual, and she finds simple and effective ways, which she generously shares, to convey this dimension to our students. I admire this essay for its twin commitment to the "obscure power" of words, "incantation[s] that coerc[e] things, mak[e] them *really* present outside of themselves" (200), and to the power of ordinary classroom interaction to bring this home to students.

I leave it to the reader to assess the usefulness, accuracy, and above all the wisdom of classifying critical work by reference to schools, movements, and isms. Many of the scholars treated in this review are wary of the new-formalist label, and I share their bias against the categorical thinking encouraged by such labels, which have been legion over the past half century. Those who hope to revive what they take to be a marginalized or vilified formal sensitivity to literature—a sensitivity ruled out of court, they say, by the dogmatic cast of new historicism—might worry the irony of their own turn to sectarian and, in some cases, extremist self-definition, however liberal its ideals and however pitched to the provocation.

Notes

1. Appendix A lists studies that represent alternative solutions to problems addressed by new formalism; while these studies interest themselves in the formal conditions of textuality, their notion of form has more to do with information, performance, and deformation than with literary kinds or indeed with literature proper. Appendixes B and C give notice of two scholarly developments closely related to new formalism—namely, the striking interest in metrical study observable over the past decade and the upsurge of interest in disinterest (e.g., Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*).

2. A word is in order here about the relation between complexity and contradiction, for it marks a major dividing line between the two new formalisms. Normative formalists see the two as mutually exclusive; on their account, to find contradiction in a poem is to reduce it to a case of either technical incompetence or historical misrepresentation and false consciousness. For activist formalists, contradiction and complexity are more like an identity, or at the least a complementarity. On their reading, contradiction arises from the dialectical situation of the work both "in itself" or regarded as a gesturally or institutionally integral structure *and* as it exists in dynamic exchange with its diverse environments. Far from discrediting the artwork as an instance of false consciousness, contradiction authenticates it. Interestingly, in positing the creative agency of contradiction, dialectical reading

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risks canceling out the accidents and mishaps of history and is, ironically, vulnerable to the charge of formalism. New historicism, at its most effective, steers between two kinds of reductiveness: the oft-cited reduction of form to content and the rarely cited (with the early and major exception of Liu) tendency to marry "form and content . . . and ma[k]e them one, and that one is form." We can thank Myra Jehlen for teasing out this nice irony (45).

3. I cite work by colleagues at my university alone: Julie Ellison; Lucy Hartley; June Howard; Adela Pinch; the chapter on the poetess in Prins.

4. Clark is quoting Murray Krieger, originally in Krieger and Krieger 258.

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