theories and methodologies

The Political Fallacy

SANDRA MACPHERSON

WHAT KIND OF ACTION IS LITERARY CRITICISM? IN *LITERARY CRITICISM: A CONCISE POLITICAL HISTORY*, JOSEPH NORTH TELLS US UP FRONT: it's political action. His history "is explicitly motivated by present concerns: one has something like a goal, and something like a plan for reaching it," and his goal is to persuade "readers on the radical left" that there is something at stake for them in "an extended discussion of matters literary, aesthetic, and methodological" (viii, ix, x). Or, rather, his goal is to persuade both readers on the left and "readers within and around academic literary studies" that their interests align: that the "materialist account of the aesthetic" at the root of close reading is "properly understood as part of a longer history of resistance to the economic, political, and cultural systems that prevent us from cultivating deeper modes of life" (x).

But not all acts are equally active, not all politics properly political. "For the left today," North says, "politics must be a question, not just of taking reckonings in the service of some longed-for victory in the future, but of taking action in the present: of fighting to develop for ourselves and others lives at least minimally rich in capabilities and sensitivities" (19). Literary critics who "read texts in order to understand and theorize the social" imagine themselves to be engaged in a political project (10). But such scholarship—he points to cultural studies, ideology critique, new historicism, postcolonial literary scholarship, digital humanities, and quantitative literary studies (16)—lacks "any programmatic commitment, not just to analyzing and describing the culture, but to taking action to change it" (18). The fight against capitalism and neoliberalism "is being fought, must be fought, on the terrain of sensibility," he warns, and a literary criticism "properly attentive to political concerns" is required if we intend to fight this fight, and to "win" (xi). What stands to be won is less the "humane future" for all lives that lies on the other side of neoliberal capital than the persistence of humanistic inquiry in total (19).

North's sense that—to paraphrase Carolyn Porter—we are not being political yet (253), surprises me, since nothing runs deeper

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in the recent history and practice of literary criticism than the presumption that criticism is politics by other means. To his mind, however, we are not being political enough: stuck in the enforced modesty of disciplinary expertise, we have failed to be imaginative about the domains to which our practices might, and should, extend. I suspect that he will be taken to task—perhaps in these pages—for his optimism about esthesis and especially for questioning the revolutionary bona fides of avowedly political forms of critique. These are not my objections. At one point, he assures us that he is not offering a formalism "in the old aesthetic way"—which is to say, "as indicating a commitment to something in the range of self-authoring, self-sufficient, autonomous, or autotelic form" (146, 145). "That would be professional suicide," he announces (146). As someone on record as committed to something precisely in this range, I am of course dismayed to hear that my career is over. But I also wonder if, in his rejection of this third rail of literary criticism, he doesn't open himself up to the charge (projected onto an imagined "skeptical observer") that his new method is "built around neither liberalism nor leftism, but careerism, plain and simple" (146). I am not suggesting North is not the perfectly rigorous leftist he claims to be—only that in being perfectly leftist, he offers a method that isn't as sui generis as he hopes. For while he might have escaped Fredric Jameson's demand—"Always historicize!" (9)—he doubles down on the demand that invariably follows: always politicize.

Something similar happens in Caroline Levine's *Forms*, a book North does not cite but that anticipates his shot across the bow at the "historicist/contextualist paradigm" and his articulation of a method that is "able to move broadly, in something like a generalist fashion, across time, places, and cultures; willing to use the literary as a means of ethical (or political?) education; and . . . committed in a deep and rigorous but still fairly direct way to a public role" (10, 194). He calls this method criticism; Levine calls it formalism. But both share the "strategic presentism" prescribed by Anna Kornbluh and Benjamin Morgan in their "Manifesto of the V21 Collective" and that Kornbluh, in a book manuscript, helpfully christens "political formalism." Political formalism is grounded in the presumption, as Levine represents it in her brief review of Jesse Taylor's *The Sky of Our Manufacture* on the blog *V21*, that "literary reading methods might help us to remake political life" ("Reflection"). Literature is a "useful abstraction" for grasping, in this case, "relations between the institutional, geologic, and economic factors that make up the climate" and that cannot otherwise "be directly represented or known." "It is for this reason," she says, "that we need a mediating abstraction—novelistic form—to help us to imagine, understand, and act on the problem of climate."

It seems to me, writing in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, that climate requires no such mediation for its comprehensibility. One might be baffled about how to act on the problem of climate change, but it appears unlikely that among the fragments shored against our ruin will be the political efficacy of a particularly trenchant take on T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Levine disagrees. A strong claim for the political necessity and agency of literature and literary criticism is at the heart of *Forms*. Levine shares with North, as with most new formalists, whether presentist or historicist (indeed, as with most historicists—whether old, new, or dialectical), an unshakeable belief that the work of literary criticism "is an attempt to think about how we might make our world more just" (xii). Not simply an attempt to think. Literary criticism also offers "those who care passionately about unjust arrangements of power" a "tool" for intervening in and altering those arrangements (xiii).

But what kind of tool is Levine's reading of *The Wire* in the final chapter of *Forms*, for example? What kind of intervention is

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made and on what? The argument there—an argument in line with that of the book as a whole—is that *The Wire* reveals a social world in which power is distributed, and that whenever power is distributed, it ceases to be overpowering. Her investment in the possibility that whatever takes form will change form, and that change cracks open the prospect of freedom, is so profound it frequently subverts the logic of her most engaging insights. Levine points out, "Some of the most powerful temporal forms in the series are patterns of surrogation. As soon as characters die, get fired, or go to jail, others replace them" (140). "There are no dramatic historical breaks on *The Wire*," she adds, "precisely because the many institutions that impose order on experience—family, school, government, business—operate by way of iterable patterns of surrogation and replacement" (141). But "*this is not the same as fatalism or stasis*," she insists, never explaining why institutions' radical indifference to particularity—their capacity to remain the same despite a continual replacement of parts—is anything other than an index of the show's debt to the determinism of nineteenth-century social realism and naturalism (141; emphasis mine). "Far from an ideologically coherent society with power lodged in the hands of a few," she contends, "*The Wire* gives us a social world constantly unsettled by the bewildering and unexpected effects of clashes among wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks" (149). OK. And yet it does not follow that because effects are "bewildering" they are not causally inexorable, nor that because no single social form is decisive—neither capitalism nor information nor law nor kinship—none of them taken together are. It does not follow that because a handful of characters "temporarily" "frustrate or elude the conventional distribution of power" (149), this constitutes an escape from enclosing shapes *tout court*—the show is, after all, an aesthetic object that, however multiple its subplots, nevertheless comes to an end—still less that it entails the possibility of escape for those of us following along at home.

Levine wants form to be "messy" because she wants to be able to say, as she says of the character Omar Little, that we are all "comparatively free" (74, 150). This seems an odd thing to say about a literary character—especially one who is shot in the head by someone who, in an exemplary and self-conscious instance of dramatic irony, has learned from watching him how to act like Omar. Earlier in the book Levine complains of Cleanth Brooks that he is "actually *not formalist enough*," and a similar complaint might be lodged against her own formalism (31). She is rather uninterested in the operations of literary form, or perhaps because of extraliterary commitments she has only one thing to say about a range of genres, forms, media, and modes: that they are good when they are open and bad when they are closed.

Take, for example, her analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Young Queen" in the chapter on rhythm. The section begins by once again stipulating, without really explaining, the central argument of the book—that "it is important to understand encounters between social tempos in order to bring about social change" (74). Important for whom? What kind of causality is an encounter or indeed an understanding? What kind of change is social change? Does understanding itself bring about change? Is some intermediate action necessary? When one puts down *Forms*, does one take up prison reform? Or is the act of reading itself the social, the transformational act? Levine presumes one knows what she means by saying that comprehension is, or is tantamount to, modification. And she is justified in supposing so—not because she has proved her point but because it is entirely conventional. She seems to imagine that her reader will balk at the "alternative model" she offers "for relating the rhythms of poetry to the rhythms of social experience" (74). But the only alteration in the model is to say that what

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looks like a homology—"reading poetic meter as a reflection of social tempos"—is a different homology. "Here I will make the case that rhythmic forms and political institutions both seek to control time, but they do so in different and contending ways," she announces (74). Surely it is not controversial to suggest that a poem is not the same as a school calendar. It would not look controversial to Brooks. But neither would it to any of the people against whom Levine sets her sights. The only distinction between what she goes on to say about Barrett Browning and what is said by the "new formalists," who are "eager to interpret the relationship between metrical forms and social institutions" (74), is that whereas they ground the connection between form and politics in an isomorphism of "equilibrium," she grounds hers in "collision, superimposition, even mind-boggling disarray" (80).

But how mind-bogglingly disordered is a poem whose stanzas are composed of iambic trimeter couplets followed without variation by heptameter lines of alternating rhyme? It's not that Levine doesn't offer an analysis of this structure. That's not why the work isn't "*formalist enough*." It is not formalist enough because in offering an analysis (instead of, say, a description), she continually disregards the evidence of the poem. The claim that Barrett Browning "gives us a relatively—but far from perfectly—regular rhythm in a metrical form that both evokes traditional prosody and also departs from it" and that therefore "there is no perfectly recognizable conventional form at work" is prima facie false. The meter is regular, and the only reason Levine doesn't think so is because her argument depends on not thinking so.[1] That argument proceeds by conflating unconventionality with irregularity: "The Young Queen" is said to resemble "the poulter's measure" and then shown to deviate from a norm that Levine herself has established for the poem. While it would be wrong, she says, to read this pattern "as a deliberate manifestation of Barrett Browning's own liberalism—in favor of moderate change rather than stasis or revolution," it is not wrong to assume that the pattern has a politics (78). Indeed, she concludes that "Barrett Browning's metrical choices in this poem on Queen Victoria . . . point to a fruitful new conception of the relations between literary and political forms"—a conception that happens to resemble her own: namely, that "many conflicting and overlapping organizing principles merely *try* to impose monolithic laws on experience, while often instead producing confusing and shapeless blots rather than integrated power" (80, 81).

The evocative phrase "shapeless blots" is taken from the second stanza of "The Young Queen," where it is the culmination of an elaborate, extended personification. Londoners' cognitive confusion at the way the death of a sovereign momentarily conflates throne and sepulchre (the synecdochic logic of the former transferred to the latter) is metaphorized as a cloud or eclipse occluding the city's and the country's view of the funeral procession:

> St. Paul's king-dirging note
> The city's heart hath smote—
> The city's heart is struck with thought more
> solemn than the tone!
> The shadow sweeps apace
> Before the nation's face,
> Confusing in a shapeless blot both sepulchre
> and throne. (qtd. in Levine, *Forms* 76)

Levine is right that "Barrett Browning draws our attention to the fact that the event of royal succession must come so quickly that it has to interrupt another momentous ritual: the funeral" (76). But because she passes over anything but the semantic (and thematic) content of the lines, she misses the stanza's full virtuosity. Barrett Browning multiplies figures so that the personified city receives the sound of the bells in a heart transformed almost immediately into a mind whose sadness and confusion are projected outward, and upward, in a double personification. The city

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has a heart, but it also *is* the heart of another personified being—the nation, or sun, whose dark thoughts obscure her view as they do that of the assembled masses who are at once cause and effect of the generalized stupefaction. Whatever one might want to call this elaborate conceit, "shapeless" it is not. Even the "shapeless blot" is neither shapeless nor "confused": it is a sepulchre that, in carrying the king's body, again synecdochically carries the throne. Perception of the object might be confused, but the object is not. London or Londoners might be confused, but the poet is not. And this is before one registers the scheme of the total poetic object, which is unflaggingly perspicuous:

A
A
B
C
C
B

D
D
E
F
F
E

Etc.

Levine acknowledges that "poetry can impose its own order" and that this order is different from the "social tempos" described, on her account, in a poem like "The Young Queen" (79). But because the raison d'être of the chapter is to ask "what poetic rhythm could do justice" to the "blurry superimposition of real rhythms in the world" that she claims is reflected in the poem's content, that order must be, can only be, disorderly (78). She worries about the capacity of form to "impose a powerfully homogenizing, unifying order on the social" (80). And because homogeneity is intolerable for her politically, it is intolerable aesthetically. Indeed, it cannot be said to be there, even when it is.

This need to separate form and totality is the fundamental, categorical imperative of political formalism. It is a commitment made explicit in Levine's account of Brooks, whose "troubling mystification of form" is not, as it is for me, that he establishes a homology between aesthetics and politics in the first place but that the homology is grounded in a figure of unity (30). Levine asserts that ever since the publication of Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn*, to think of form is to "think of a containing wholeness, which in turn calls up frightening models of political control and totality, ranging from fascist wholeness to liberal assimilation" (31). I don't find myself as frightened of sonnets as I am of Nazis. Perhaps I would be if I understood Levine's causality—what it means for one thing to call up another. (I understand what it means when one is talking about the Identity Evropa flyers cropping up with disturbing frequency around my campus, texts put there by actual fascists whose slogan "protect our heritage" is a call to deport immigrants. I am less clear on how, or why, a refusal to vary from fourteen lines would constitute a form of social oppression.) But since I don't understand the causality, I remain skeptical that there are any necessary political effects to Brooks's—or anyone else's—literary ontology.

Levine makes Brooks representative of New Criticism generally for presuming that "good poetry achieves a taut unity out of complex materials," and she insists that such a position represents an "aesthetic-political project" (27, 28). Here, despite the similarities of their methods, she and North disagree. For North, only I. A. Richards's line of psychological criticism with its emphasis on readerly uptake has, or can be adapted for, political ends. Brooks, he argues, is "typical of the movement of which he is a part" in seeking to "rescue the aesthetic from the realm of practical, material, and instrumental values, where Richards had tried to put it, and instead put it back into the Kantian realm of transcendent value

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where it seemed to belong" (44). As a result of the suspicion of "psychological machinery," literary studies and literary education became centered on the task of determining "what was 'good' art and what was 'bad' art without any reference to what the art might be good or bad *for*" (39, 45). North believes that we've never really escaped this legacy, that even when we think we're doing political work, to the extent that we reproduce academic norms, styles, and venues of critique, we reinforce the essential uselessness of our discipline.

But he hasn't read *Forms*. Levine is interested in the question of good or bad art solely as it is good or bad *for* something. "[T]o make advances in this new period," North concludes his book, "we will also need to mobilize these analyses [that is, leftist literary criticism], setting them to work as the diagnostic element in a broader project of systematic cultural intervention" (211). It's an intervention that must happen on the terrain of a "genuinely radical, rather than liberal, project of subject formation," he says, one dedicated to "cultivating new collectivities" (211, 212). Levine doesn't have much to say about subject formation, but she is committed to cultivating new collectivities and offers reading form, and reading *Forms*, as a way to "open up a new set of opportunities for real change by way of feasible rearrangements" (17). It's an agenda tailor-made to satisfy North's call for a genuinely radical, genuinely political criticism. "I suggest here," Levine announces at the beginning of the first chapter of *Forms*, amid the critique of Brooks's aesthetic unitarianism, "that we will want to draw on the containing and unifying power of concepts, despite their dangers, in the interests of genuinely emancipatory and transformative political work." "How might that work look?" she asks (28). For her, the answer is clear: to be "canny" and "strategic" about the manifold forms of the world is to find "many opportunities, large and small, to hamper networks [or wholes or hierarchies or rhythms] and their coordinating powers" (131). For this reader, however, the question of how that might work, how that might look, remains.

Note

1. One might be tempted to insist that the couplets opening stanza 5—"Her thoughts are deep within her: / No outward pageants win her" (lines 25–26)—are irregular, since Barrett Browning could have excised the repeating "her" for a more traditional couplet rhyme and a more easily scanned trimeter beat (Browning). Levine doesn't point to this moment, but we are all trained to make interpretive hay of such apparent deviations from a poem's internal laws. You can probably do it in your sleep: the repetition of the formally unnecessary gendered pronoun doubles the number of female bodies present in this scene of a young woman standing on the cold grave of her father the king, allowing the poet to arrogate to herself a similar share of sovereignty in the genealogy of poetic succession. Or something. But the point is that the lines are not irregular: the iambic trimeter norm forces us to read "within her" as "within'er," cramming the three syllables as much as possible into two. There is no extra foot here, nor even the hint of one.

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