theories and methodologies

The Commitment to Form; or, Still Crazy after All These Years

W. J. T. MITCHELL

Having counted the adjectives, and weighed the lines, and measured the rhythms, a Formalist either stops silent with the expression of a man who does not know what to do with himself, or throws out an unexpected generalization which contains five per cent of Formalism and ninety-five per cent of the most uncritical intuition.

—Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (ch. 5)

Bring out number weight & measure in a year of dearth.

—Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (35)

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT THE CONCEPT OF FORM HAS OUTLIVED ITS USEFULNESS IN DISCUSSIONS OF LITERATURE, THE ARTS, AND media. The word does not appear in the recent handbooks of critical terms in art history and literary studies issued by the University of Chicago Press (Nelson and Shiff; Lentricchia and McLaughlin), and it appears in Raymond Williams's classic glossary, *Keywords*, only in its derivative (and mainly pejorative) form as an "-ism," as in the phrase "mere formalism." Formalists, as we know, are harmless drudges who spend their days counting syllables, measuring line lengths, and weighing emphases (Trotsky), or they are decadent aesthetes who waste their time celebrating beauty and other ineffable, indefinable qualities of works of art. If form has any afterlife in the study of literature, its role has been completely overtaken by the concept of structure, which rightly emphasizes the artificial, constructed character of cultural forms and defuses the idealist and organicist overtones that surround the concept of form. The replacement of form by structure, in fact, is one way of telling the whole story of twentieth-century criticism. Russian formalism gives way to structuralism; reflection on neo-Kantian "symbolic forms" (Ernst Cassirer) gives way to the arbitrary signifiers of language; supposedly natural forms are exposed as artificial structures in the critical rituals of social and cultural constructivism. Indeed, as John Carlos Rowe suggests, "the history of the shift from the use of 'form' to 'structure' . . . reflects the gradual shift from industrial and material Western economies

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to the postmodern economy of 'information' and 'service' that now governs productive and personal relations in the developed nations" (29). Against the weight of such a formidable array of historical forces, how can the poor formalist, a throwback to simpler times, hope to survive?[1]

The historical obsolescence of form only seems worse when one puts it in the context of the question of scholarly commitment, the dedication of the critic or researcher to a higher ethical or political purpose. Commitment makes sense, we suppose, only in the realm of ends—a commitment to social justice, political liberty, world peace, mutual tolerance, universal happiness, or some other worthy goal. Form seems at best to belong to the merely instrumental sphere of means. This is another reason that structure has displaced form. The displacement reflects the emergence of a committed scholarship, one that sees the work of art (like culture, society, and politics) as a constructed entity, an arbitrary assemblage of parts, and not as an organic form governed by inner necessities. Structure helps us to see the subordinate character of what used to be called form and to do something about it by re- or deconstructing it. So form—or, better, structure—is the *manner* in which something is done, a way of getting from here to there, a spatial or temporal pattern that has value only in relation to the end it serves. If the work has structure, work itself (as the working, the job or labor, of the artist) is a formal process that may have to proceed in a state of what Keats called "Negative Capability," a going on when the end is not in sight. The phrase "a commitment to form" seems, then, paradoxical if not nonsensical. That is why it has some chance, as Theodor Adorno would say, of being dialectical—that is, of activating thought as opposed to merely telling us what we want to hear.

In invoking Adorno, I am thinking specifically of his acerbic 1962 essay "Commitment," with its trenchant critique of "committed" (as opposed to "autonomous") art.[2] As Adorno puts it, "[C]ommitment often means bleating what everyone is already saying or at least secretly wants to hear." "Committed works all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease" (317). These words are worth recalling in a time when so many scholarly authors feel that to advance professionally they must display a progressive political heart on their sleeves and repeat mantras about "resistance," "transgression," and "emancipation" (affirming what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as "campus radicalism" [41]). The repetition of these slogans is irritating in direct proportion to one's solidarity with the commitments they express. We want our progressive friends and allies to be better than the reactionaries who espouse high-minded commitments to "family values," "real quality," and "humanity." There are few things more disheartening than the realization that authors' commitments guarantee nothing about the worth of their scholarly investigations.

Adorno, as is well known, poses a kind of formalism in the autonomous work of art as a salutary negation of the empirical reality it wants to contest.[3] The ban on lyric poetry after Auschwitz is a ban on poetry "committed" directly to portraying the victims. The "uncompromising radicalism" of Schoenberg's works is expressed, he notes, by "the very features defamed as formalism," which "give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time" (312). Beckett, Picasso, and Kafka do not express their commitments. They remind us of "the true relation of art to reality, whose elements are regrouped by its formal laws" (314). "The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand" (315). Commitment, for Adorno, is to formalism as demand is to compulsion.

But Adorno admits that the opposition between committed and autonomous art, between tendentiousness and formalism, is not a simple choice between propaganda and aesthetic authenticity. "Each of the two alternatives," he notes, "negates itself with the other. Committed

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art, necessarily detached as art from reality, cancels the distance between the two," thus forfeiting any possibility of criticality. "Art for art's sake" culminates in "forms so ephemeral . . . that from their first day they belong to the seminars in which they inevitably end" (301). Commitment, in short, leads to kitsch, and formalism leads to academicism. The compulsion and inescapability of formalism may lead to an end just as dead as the cul-de-sac of propaganda.[4]

Is there any way beyond the terrible impasse Adorno posed for us? That is what I want to explore in the notion of a commitment to form. But this will require not simply returning to the concepts of form and formalism of yesteryear or restating old commitments. It will necessitate a rethinking of both terms and of the relation between them.

Adorno gives us a starting point for the rethinking of "committed literature" when he contrasts it to "tendency" writing, or straightforward propaganda. "What gives commitment its aesthetic advantage over tendentiousness" is that it "renders the content to which the artist commits himself inherently ambiguous," thus opening up a realm of free choice for the reader. Adorno is, of course, skeptical of Sartre's faith in the capacity of this ambiguity to awaken the reader's "free choice," the fundamental condition of existentialist authenticity. "Freedom becomes a vacant claim," notes Adorno, when it is abstracted from the concrete circumstances of what can be chosen. The Sartrean "notion of choice" is an heir to Kierkegaard's Christianity, but without any concrete theological content (304).

I would like to propose an addendum to Adorno's distinction between commitment and tendency, one that calls into question its association with free choice. We recognize this distinction in the vernacular contrast between "making a commitment" and "being committed." Making a commitment is like entering into a bargain or contract, though the word *commitment*, I suspect, adds a connotation of depth and engagement, a dimension of ethical seriousness, that goes beyond the merely legalistic (I almost said "merely formal") sense of contractual obligation. Being committed, by contrast, is something one discovers about oneself, a situation or condition of engagement that I find myself in. Wordsworth describes his early-childhood awakenings of a poetic vocation in terms of an unspoken and perhaps involuntary speech act: "I made no vows, but vows were then made for me" (4.334–35). This kind of commitment is not made but found, not constructed voluntarily but discovered as something we were already committed to without being aware of it. It is most emphatically expressed in the scenario of being committed against one's will, as when one is committed to a mental hospital.

This meaning of commitment leads me to my subtitle—"Still Crazy after All These Years." Although I have laid out some reasons for thinking that literary scholars have, in the half century since the New Criticism was dominant, thought of themselves as moving beyond formalism into more capacious arenas like history, culture, and politics, I think most people will recognize that the contrary story could be told as well, the one in which formalism keeps returning, along with other repressed notions, like imagination and beauty and spirit. Formalism continues to rear its head, even when most fervently disavowed. The title of Geoffrey Hartman's *Beyond Formalism* promises what it cannot and does not want to deliver. "To go beyond formalism," says Hartman, "is as yet too hard for us and may even be, unless we are Hegelians believing in absolute spirit, against the nature of understanding" (42). When we turn, however, to the leading American Hegelian of our time, we find Fredric Jameson laying out the literary critical program of modern Marxism in a book about form. *Marxism and Form* does not allow structure to displace form in the critical lexicon. For Jameson, Marxism *is* a formalism in its commitment to totality, expressed as both structure and form, as a system of relations, and as a perceptible shape or "Gestalt": "the influence of class consciousness

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on thought is felt not so much in the perception of the individual details of reality as in the overall form or Gestalt according to which those details are organized and interpreted" (184). Far from discarding formalism, Jameson wants to extend and deepen it, linking the "form/content" division in literature to the "superstructure/infrastructure" split in political economy. Literature becomes a "privileged microcosm" of the operations of the dialectic, all the way down to the "shape of the individual sentences" (xi).[5]

It seems fitting, then, that one of the most famously "committed" and politically engaged literary scholars of our moment is a die-hard formalist. I am thinking of Edward Said, who exemplifies what I would call commitment to form at every level of the literary enterprise. Said's formalism is not confined to his work on music but permeates his literary, cultural, and political criticism much more broadly. "Most literary critics," he observes, "focus on what is said in Palestinian writing . . . its sociological and political meaning. . . . But it is the form that should be looked at" (316). *After the Last Sky*, Said's photo-essay (in collaboration with Jean Mohr) on the Palestinians, is notable for its emphasis on formal issues in the representation of Palestinian society, from the look of Palestinian interiors to the spatial aesthetics of refugee camps and communities of exile to the formal relations of photography and writing as metaphors for exile and return.[6] Said's writings on Palestine are also notable for their consistent refusal of both "tendentious" and "committed" expressions on behalf of the Palestinian cause. He insists on criticizing not just the Israeli antagonists but the dangerous illusions of the Palestinians as well, particularly the "macho romanticism" that adopts the wrong revolutionary models and leads to personality cults, corruption, and abuse of power—in short, to Arafat. Said does not put his formalism to sleep when he writes about politics or engages in polemics based in a commitment to social justice and emancipation. On the contrary, his formalism seems to engage all the more deeply as the political stakes become more urgent. Far from despising the minutiae of formal analysis, of reflection on the precise way things are said or shown, Said seems to have hearkened to Blake's Proverb of Hell, written as if in anticipation of Trotsky's animadversions on formalism: "Bring out number weight & measure in a year of dearth."

Formalism can be many things, and I do not mean to suggest that a commitment to form solves our problems as scholars or citizens or human beings. Like any other commitment, form can become a hollow slogan, a bleating of what everyone is saying or wants to hear. I have insisted on saying it because, I take it, this is not what we want to hear about commitment now, and therefore it offers at least the minor valence of critical negation. If I had more time, I would articulate more fully my conviction that a commitment to form is also finally a commitment to emancipatory, progressive political practices united with a scrupulous attention to ethical means. Insofar as formalism insists on paying attention to a way of being in the path rather than to where the path leads, it seems to me central to any notion of right action. But most simply, I have wanted to expose the extent to which we are in fact committed to form and to various formalisms without knowing it. Our disavowal of form might be worth reflecting on further, especially in a moment when the old idealist-materialist and nature-artifice distinctions that underwrote the difference between form and structure are being redefined. The modernist moment of form, whether modeled on organisms, perceptual gestalten, or structural coherence, may be behind us, but that only means that some new notion of form, and thus a new kind of formalism, lies before us. This will be a formalism we will have already been committed to for some time without knowing it.

Notes

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at the 1999 MLA convention. I want to thank Rob Kaufman for his help with the texts of Adorno.

[1] For an account of my own misspent career as a formalist, see my interview with Orrin Wang ("Last Formalist").

[2] First given as a talk on Radio Bremen, 28 Mar. 1962. I use the Arato translation in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. See also the version in *Notes to Literature*.

[3] Also, it must be said that, on another flank, Adorno believes that a literary form (especially the essay) contests the structured and systemic procedures of philosophical and scientific academicism. See "The Essay as Form," esp. 18 ("the essay devours the theories that are close to it; its tendency is always to liquidate opinion, especially the opinion it takes as its point of departure") and 23 ("the essay's innermost formal law is heresy").

[4] Even more sinister than the academic dead end of formalism is (as Adorno was surely aware) its political-judicial-military dead end, which in the name of forms and procedures can haul millions of people off to their death. Or the dazzling formal virtuosity of the terrorist "work of art," the commitment of both the suicide artist and the high-tech imperial nation-state to formal means that sacrifice human life as mere "collateral damage."

[5] See also Tony Bennett's important book *Formalism and Marxism*.

[6] For more on this, see my chapter "The Photographic Essay" in *Picture Theory* (281–322). Said's collaborative photo-essay with Mohr is especially notable for the formal virtuosity of its image-text interweave, a feature that links it to such classics in the genre as Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

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