

This is not to quibble or to question the validity of the metaphors we use to conjure up literary form. It is, though, to suggest that the metaphors we use are always motivated, and that it is best to be as aware as we can of those motivations, especially when we seek to connect texts to the social or natural world by way of the formal attributes we ascribe to each. To the extent that literary language—poetic, narrative, or dramatic—is highly organized, it is not at all misleading to say that forms inhere in texts. At the same time, the figures we employ in order to think cogently and creatively about form are heuristic devices that need not be organically related to the texts at all. We make use of some figures rather than others because we seek answers to one set of questions rather than another. Our inquiries are context-specific, as are the vocabularies we use to pursue them. Here again student responses can be clarifying. Is literary form “in” a text, I ventriloquize them asking, or is it something you just make up? Do you find it or invent it? Those are not the only two options, but it is not hard to see why the question is posed that way. Found or invented? The answer is yes. One challenge of teaching formalism is to explain why that is so, and why it matters.

NOTES

1. Paul B. Armstrong, “Form and History: Reading as an Aesthetic Experience and Historical Act,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2008): 195–219, 198.
2. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, “Form and Explanation,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (2017): 650–69, 664, 665.
3. Sandra Macpherson, “A Little Formalism,” *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 385–405, 390.



Formalism

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A trusted colleague’s having written on *form* leaves me to tease out its associated *-ism*, and the contentious family of terms of which that suffix makes it a member. I don’t think my keyword belongs with Methodism, Marxism, and other badges of adherence to a system of

belief. Nor does it quite go with spoonerism and aphorism, which you can commit but can hardly be committed to, much less profess. And yet these latter terms still faintly savor of the systematic: when we call a piece of wit a witticism we conjure an orientation towards discourse that seems a shade more deliberate than may be fully compatible with the free play of wit. Ditto the deeper gravamen of plagiarism, which denotes an act but connotes, alas, a policy. While formalism may not constitute a program for literary scholarship, it has designs on the field nevertheless. Finically preferring certain reading behaviors over others, it always arouses dislike. Long may it continue to do so.

Formalism, a fighting word, thrives on polemical occasions. Just now routinized contextualism is in retreat before a rising generation of scholars who don't merely pay court to form as a matter of principle, or summon it to ice an argument already baked, but actively devise new tools of formal analysis whereby to generate arguments in the first place. We are at a juncture, that is, where formalism can afford to lick its wounds and savor the struggles in which they were earned. The latest struggles arose a couple of decades ago, at least for nineteenth-century studies they did, and as usual they were waged in the first instance by Romanticists—Susan Wolfson (1997), Marshall Brown (2000, 2006), Marjorie Levinson (2007)—who pushed back against a shopworn Historicism that was so far from New that it was cheapening monographs, overrunning conferences, and stultifying classrooms.¹ By the time Levinson could invite *PMLA* readers to ponder what the “New Formalism” was, the tide had turned, in a direction that the honorific plural in a 2013 title like *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* placed beyond doubt.²

As for the wounds, they tell a much older story. Francis Bacon and John Milton reprobated *formalists* as pretenders to wisdom who strutted a stiff attachment to conservative routine. In church matters the formalist was by innuendo a hypocrite, in matters of state a reactionary obstructing innovation under the cover of a strict constructionist devotion to rules. The likewise pejorative term *formalism* had to await Victorian coinage, of which the first *OED* usage occurs on a page from *Alton Locke* (1850) where Charles Kingsley's frustrated hero twice decries it as a besetting sin of, you guessed it, intellectual life at the university.³ So hostile a tradition leaves Victorianist formalism presumptively—until it speaks in its own defense—somewhere between arraignment under St. Paul's spirited denunciation of the letter that killeth and the academic guilt that comes by association with, say, the doctrines of the late Antonin Scalia. But of course Victorianist formalism will speak in its own defense. Seeing to

that is why I came to this *VLC* party. I can't do so better than by remarking (1) that defense is what formalism does best and (2) that literary studies in our time will have to play the best defense it can muster, up to and including the kind that looks like, and risks giving, offense. Formalism is not so much a position as an agenda, a disciplinary pressure whose selfless mission is and ever has been to rescue literary study from the all too human propensity to jilt art for the seductions of meaning.

Defining formalism is no fun: either the task devolves into tautology or it stumbles into the rabbit-warren of defining form. We can do better by asking what formalism's opposite may be. *Contentualism* won't help, if only because it looks so much like the ungainly word that forms the subject of my second paragraph's second sentence. Please ponder the awkward neology anyhow, long enough to appreciate its superfluity within a discipline where it goes without saying that texts have content and are written and published in order to deliver a message. Formalism finds a worthier opposite in *hermeneutics*, which recognizes some rules of engagement and concedes that finding out textual meanings requires skills that may be honed by methodical practice. For it is at the ample table of hermeneutic method that formalism perennially lobbies for a seat. It's the business of formalism to remind interpreters that there is no content without form and thus that a failure to read for form is ultimately a disservice to content itself, which will vary, by a little or a lot, wherever form does. Indeed, the relation is reversible. Ralph Waldo Emerson's glittering tissue of antiformalist slogans in "The Poet" (1844) concedes the reciprocity of message with medium as soon as it affirms the "instant dependence of form upon soul." His insistence that "it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem" demonstrates in the very saying of it that meter and poem are alike *made*, that meters are the first fruits of poetic argument, and therefore that whoso would look on it must come to them.⁴ Interpretive meaning grows intimate with interpretive performance.

Or maybe for our purposes the opposite of formalism is *dynamism*. Derrida launched his epochal *L'Écriture et la différence* with an essay championing "force" over "form," prophetically aligning poststructuralism with antiformalism—and yet, in the process, opening his work to eventual critique on the grounds that deconstruction was but formalism's quintessence.⁵ Cutting the cord between rhetorical contrivance and textual meaning, deconstruction embraced the pursuit of signs and nothing but, astray amid a wilderness of traces. We who are Victorianists needn't resort to wholesale de Manian demolition, however, to grasp form and force as aspects of each other: their relation is written all over the

industrial era. Thomas Carlyle's hyperventilating dynamism throbs across the literary nineteenth century. We meet it in John Ruskin's architectural lesson that form follows function; in the life sciences' subordination of morphology to physiology, entailed as it was by evolutionism's master thesis that what survives is what works; and most handily in the poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins, where the *inscape* of created form, once caught, buckles to reveal the creative force of *instress*. This ubiquitous Victorian dynamism at once affirms the ultimate, ontological priority of force (form's cause) and the mediate, practical priority of form (force's index). As a matter of practice, if it's force you're after, then form is where you have to look for it—because form is after force too: the force that came and went is what form remains the legible trace of.⁶ So dynamism is not the opposite of formalism after all but instead its *raison d'être*. Say rather its pretext, and leave formalism to cope with what's left: the text. This formalist will settle for that.

NOTES

1. Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Wolfson and Marshall Brown, eds., a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000), and *Reading for Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA* 122 (2007): 558–69.
2. Verena Thiele and Linda Tredennick, eds., *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). See also Fredric V. Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).
3. Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet: An Autobiography*, ed. Elizabeth A. Cripps (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 137, see chap. 13.
4. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 222, 225.
5. Jacques Derrida, "Force et signification," in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 9–50.
6. See recent reflections on this dynamist theme in Sandra Macpherson, "A Little Formalism," *ELH* 82 (2015): 385–405, especially 388–89.

