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FANTASIES OF FORM

Sheila Liming

Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network by Caroline Levine.
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“Is this what critics do?” This is the question lurking at the heart of Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), a recent work of literary criticism that seeks to merge disparate trends in literary scholarship via a renewed interest in form. Though Levine does not actually pose this question until chapter 4, her preceding discussion in this book is similarly characterized by such expressions of methodological self-reflexivity. Levine asks her audience to consider whether or not critics “spin out implied stories in which new forms take shape beyond a narrative’s end,” arguing that this is, in fact, what “most politically minded critics do” (110). For Levine, the critic is responsible not only for gauging and interpreting the formal structures that buttress the operations of social existence but likewise for *creating* those structures anew. And, to this end, *Forms* constitutes a clear attempt to bring considerations of “the social” to bear on a seemingly *démodé* fixation on literary form.

Levine’s *Forms* reads like a manifesto of sorts. It calls for “a new formalist method” (3), one that merges the pure aestheticism of New Criticism with the recognition of “political power and . . . situatedness” (14)—that is to say, with materialist critique. Levine surveys the historical shifts that led to critics’ dissociation of these two modes of analysis en route to making her

case for their reincorporation. In chapter 2, for instance, Levine notes the ways in which, in the 1970s and '80s, discussions of "wholeness" contributed to the decline of formalist modes of criticism. With the rise of theory, she observes, came a suspicion for all things coherent and bounded, a suspicion prompted in part by presumptions about the variability of reader subjectivities and in part by a concern for the link between *wholes* and totalitarian ideologies. Here, Levine accurately characterizes the culture of uncertainty that prompted formalism's ouster; the Marxist critic Raymond Williams, for instance, similarly describes how like-minded materialists in the age of High Theory dismissed formalism on the basis of its root word, *form*, which Marxists saw as "as the 'mere expression' or 'outward show' of *content*."¹ But Levine refrains from granting too much credence to this debate. In fact, she distances herself from it by redefining "forms" as "patterns of sociopolitical experience" (2). With the help of words such as "sociopolitical," Levine is constructing an admirable, if perhaps somewhat unwieldy, bridge between the recent trend toward aesthetic or "surface" priorities in literary criticism and materialism's historical insistence on the text's position in social and political life.

Levine outlines five basic, categorical claims about how forms work: constraint, difference,

intersection, portability, and political application. The most compelling of these is the notion of portability, or the observation that "*forms travel*" (4, emphasis original). Portability is the key to generalizability for Levine, and generalizability is—as she makes clear via her refusal to settle for too long on any one case study—the key that opens the door to critical extrapolation. For instance, in chapter 2, Levine, who is by all other counts a Victorianist, moves from a discussion of form in Mary Gaskell's *North and South* to a discussion of the seminar room as form, generalizing on themes of enclosure, spatial division, and transnational movement. Levine concludes this chapter by examining the seminar room as an instance of portable form; after emerging in Germany in the eighteenth century, Levine describes, the seminar as model migrated, catching on in other nations and "fostering originality and independence of mind by asserting a new kind of equality between teacher and student" (46). This interchangeable swapping of conceptual and material forms is a distinguishing feature of Levine's analysis, and while it can be disorienting at times, it nevertheless serves to reinforce the "newness" of Levine's approach since it speaks to her commitment to see form as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3)

What is “new,” as Levine sees it, about this “new formalism” is its inclusivity and its interest in forging connections between “superficial appearance” and “social meaning,” to echo Williams’s etymological history of the word “form.”² Attaching sociopolitical consequences to the scrutiny of formal textual elements certainly constitutes a revision of the original formalist enterprise described by Williams. But it is worth noting that such a revision is not in and of itself necessarily *new*. At several points throughout *Forms*, Levine turns to social science to back up her claims about the centrality of formal structures in both narrative and social life. She invokes, for instance, a “group of social scientists largely unknown to literary critics” that is allied with the movement known as “new institutionalism.” Unlike literary critics, Levine suggests, these “new institutionalists” “have worked to define the term *institution* in precise and productive ways” that encompass “regulative practices” and merge the traditional meaning of the word with an interest in periodization and institutional time (57). By turning to social science, though, Levine gives short shrift to the rise of institutional critique within her own field of literary studies. Levine labels as “new” what many literary scholars—especially those working at the intersection of

institutional critique and literary history—accept as *de rigueur*.³

The success of Levine’s claims in *Forms* is, in this way, at times checked by her reticence to specify her stated objects of critique. For instance, Levine condemns historicism as a method; she says it too often results in a series of “spatial containers” that critics use to accommodate problematic homologies between specific periods and historical institutions. She advocates, instead, for a study of historical “rhythms” or “tempo” that would “refuse[] any enclosed, bounded notion of cultural experience in favor of intricately intertwined transhistorical processes of transmission” (67). It is unclear, though, who or what is the object of this critique, for Levine does not engage either subject directly. Rather, in a move that stymies the momentum of her critique of historicism, she shifts the conversation to one of her myriad case studies—the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi’s 1926 work *Bird in Space* and the controversy it inspired.⁴ Levine then concludes her analysis of Brancusi by returning to the subject of tempo, arguing that “it was a canny grasp of institutional tempos that won Brancusi [his legal] battle” (73). By this point, though, it is still not clear how “tempo” differ in Levine’s eyes from the kinds of paradigmatic shifts that often form the basis of historicist intervention. And here again, Levine pivots in

lieu of enacting a confrontation—this time, to an Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem.

Indeed, though Levine presents a diverse and almost baffling array of case studies and examples in *Forms*, she manages repeated and circuitous returns to the subject of Victorian literature. Dickens, Brontë, Gaskell, and Barrett Browning form a home base of sorts for her, and it is in these moments that Levine's analysis crescendos and appears most confident. In her discussion of Dickens's *Bleak House*, for example, which corresponds to an assessment of form as "network" in chapter 5, Levine's reading hinges on a faith in "the strength of weak ties," a perspective that has gained recent currency through the work of Franco Moretti but also Patrick Jagoda, Patrick Joyce, and others (112). Levine presents a compelling case for the study of *Bleak House* as a networked novel, pointing out that *Bleak House* "is a case where network theory and narrative theory"—two competing hierarchical forms, in her view—"can transform one another" (122). Here Levine is on firm ground; she casts Dickens's characters as Latourian "actors" in order to show us how "networks reconceptualize character" (126). But when she ventures outside of this arena and offers comparisons to "network narrative" films (in this case, *Traffic*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*), she begins to

lose her footing, defaulting to a series of evaluative claims that are contrary to the spirit of her overall argument about the coexistence, collision, and overlapping of narrative and social forms. When Levine argues that "the nineteenth-century novel is *more successful* than these feature films at analyzing the complexity and power of networked social experience" (123, emphasis added), she is choosing one form over another rather than highlighting the resulting "collision"—a favorite word of hers—that occurs when one considers both formats simultaneously through the framework of networks. Too, the addition of film makes this analysis feel somewhat unwieldy since, unlike other theorists such as Moretti and Jagoda, Levine does not extend her thinking about networks to include visualizations of the networks she is describing.

To Levine's credit, though, her study is bolstered by a clear and compelling sense of organizational logic. She usefully divides her discussion into thematic considerations of "Whole," "Rhythm," "Hierarchy," and "Network," developing each of these facets of the "new formalist" critique in turn. But she abandons that organizational structure in the final chapter of *Forms*. The result is that chapter 6, which is devoted to a discussion of David Simon's television series *The Wire*, wavers between a culmination and a detour. Levine

positions *The Wire* as a cumulative rendering of all that is form since the show's plot, she argues, opens itself up to all four modes of aforementioned formalist intervention. But here, too, evaluative rhetoric gets in the way of Levine's larger objectives and introduces a hierarchy of worth: she sprinkles her analysis of *The Wire* with words such as "superb," "rare," "striking," "genius," "exceptional," and "brilliant" (133–41) and describes it as being "unlike almost any other fictional text" (134). As with the comparison between *Bleak House* and films such as *Babel*, the logic of evaluative praise signals a point of critical impasse that curtails Levine's gestures toward generalization and appears otherwise at odds with the larger aims of her study. What is more, Levine hedges on her own decision to use *The Wire* as a case study when she highlights the difficulty of "finding a theory of the social world not in science, not in philosophy, not in experience, but in fiction" (and in *television*, no less) (133). But Levine does not need to do this: cultural studies, the analytic tradition that grew out of the theoretical turn in the '70s and '80s, opened the door to a multiplicity of objects decades ago. Theory, as Levine is no doubt aware, played an instrumental role in destabilizing the primacy of literary text in literary study. Readers might be better poised, then, to accept Levine's study of *The Wire*—a

topic on which high-profile theorists such as Slavoj Žižek have already persuasively written—if it were not for Levine's apparent hesitation to accept it herself. Such tottering between faith and insecurity has the effect of dimming Levine's overall optimism in this book.

For, at its core, *Forms* offers an intensely optimistic contribution to contemporary criticism. Levine's "new formalism" seeks to open up a space between aesthetic and materialist critique, the charms of which will likely be obvious to even the most stolid members of either camp. The focus of Levine's work, certainly, allies it with the recent turn toward "surface" reading practices that focus on "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts,"⁵ but Levine's refashioning of the discussion of form around "patterns of sociopolitical experience" gestures toward a middle ground that lies somewhere between surface and symptom. And Levine's attempts to return the critic to a position of primacy are undoubtedly appealing: the majority of her claims in this book rest on assumptions of critical agency that have the power to undo some of the depoliticizing work that has attended the new critical interest in textual surfaces. In styling her study as an inquiry into *what critics do*, Levine is placing a great deal of faith in the continued significance of the critic as a figure. Lauren Berlant similarly argues that the investment

in form is itself an act of faith, one that requires buying into the sort of “magical thinking” that presupposes “tak[ing] seriously the . . . seeing of selves and worlds as continuous.”⁶ Levine’s *Forms* is, in this way, an extended riff on fantasies of critical influence—but a very compelling one nonetheless.

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NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, “Formalism,” in *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 115.
2. *Ibid.*, 114.
3. For instance, Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* (2009) arguably evaluates the same combination of organizational influence, behaviors, patterns, rhythms, and periodizing constraints that Levine describes when discussing the “new institutionalists” coming out of the social sciences (Levine 57). In fact, Levine herself mirrors McGurl’s approach in *The Program Era* when she moves from analyzing a literary text to analyzing the physical environment that structures the discussion of such a text, as in the aforementioned transition from Gaskell’s *North and South* to the seminar room as form. McGurl, likewise, does this in his discussion of the “workshop as social form,” as he calls it: see Mark McGurl, *The Program Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 385.
4. The Brancusi case is, by far, one of the more fascinating examples that Levine offers in support of her arguments in this book. But her treatment of it is fleeting and marred somewhat by the fact that she already worked with the example—in much greater detail—in her 2007 work, *Provoking Democracy* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 150–65.
5. Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.
6. Lauren Berlant, “Two Girls, Fat and Thin,” in *Regarding Sedgwick*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 72.