6. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 1.
7. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

# Form

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A TRUISM: to understand a work of literature you must attend not just to what it says but to how it is made. That is, you must attend to form. A second truism: it can be difficult to persuade students of the truth of that truism. I am not suggesting that students never respond to a work's formal features, only that such responses tend to be felt in the blood and felt along the heart rather than brought fully into consciousness for the purposes of reflection or analysis. And, they sometimes tell me, that's as it should be. Implicit in their resistance to formal analysis is the suspicion that it is at best tangential to and at worst destructive of what is most valuable in any particular work of literature. This is the case whether the work in question is a lyric poem or a three-decker novel. Why master scansion if the point of reading poetry is to be made to feel physically as if the top of your head were taken off? Why scrutinize modes of narration or map out textual networks when your research interests center on questions of class or gender or empire that are treated thematically, and with great power, in the novels you're studying? Formal analysis can seem pedantic or hermetic (or both), a set of technical exercises designed to numb aesthetic response or else to quarantine literature from the richness and complexity of lived experience.

Outside the classroom, formalist criticism flourishes. A renewed attention to form has led to some extraordinary work over the past two decades. Thanks to this work, the questions we ask about form are richer, more various, and more supple than they once were. Those questions can invigorate not just our scholarship but our pedagogy, not least by making formal analysis seem less pedantic or hermetic (or both). Yet their very richness and variety only deepen the pedagogic challenges. Literary form is a protean concept, and students may now wonder where one

finds the fortitude to hold it fast for long enough to compel it to utter truth. As a methodology, formalism has always been capacious; at present it is even more so. As the range of critical activities brought under its heading becomes ever more extensive, we may have difficulty saying where formal analysis begins or ends. "By form I mean how a literary work is made out of artistic conventions and linguistic materials," writes Paul Armstrong.[1] Most critics, including me, would agree in principle with this definition, but it doesn't exactly narrow the field of investigation.

As many have argued, this lack of definitional clarity is not a flaw in formalism but one of its enabling conditions. According to Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, critics "need not, indeed cannot provide a single definition of form because form is an entity known by occasion." That is to say, it is a term that only "become[s] intelligible in particular and independently interesting contexts."[2] A corollary is that we find form where we seek it. The truths form utters depend on the questions we ask of it. That we can find only what we know to look for is a basic axiom of all scholarly inquiry, so thoroughly internalized that we can easily forget that it is anything but self-evident to the novice inquirers in our classrooms. Teaching form in the age of New Formalism can have the salutary effect of pushing such methodological issues into the foreground.

Students often press on the question of what exactly it means to say that a text has a form or that it contains several forms. We are accustomed to drawing analogies from the material world (trees, buildings, waves, rhizomes) or from social configurations (hierarchies, networks, genealogies), but these are of course just that: analogies. Sandra Macpherson proposes thinking of "form as nothing more—and nothing less—than the shape matter (whether a poem or a tree) takes."[3] Thinking of form in this way allows for sophisticated investigations into the nature of literary form in general, as Macpherson's essay everywhere demonstrates. Yet it seems worth saying that while a tree has a shape, a poem has a "shape." That is, its shape is figural, a mental construct we use in order to make evident some aspect of the poem in question. This is the case whether we think of form in spatial or temporal terms. A printed text is of course a material entity made of paper, ink, glue, cloth, thread, and so on, and its literal shape can be the object of fruitful analysis, but the great majority of formalist criticism takes as its object of analysis not the material work but an abstraction from it. Indeed, formalists need to abstract from the material work before they can do the things they wish to do.

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