

Reading for Form

Susan J. Wolfson

As the winter of the Starr inquiry daily dissolved the Clinton presidency into scandals involving Gap dress and power tie, the *New York Times* offered relief with a foray into the subculture of teenage fashion. "Cracking the Dress Code: How a School Uniform Becomes a Fashion Statement" provided a less lurid moment of cultural formation.¹ "It's how you *want* to look," said one student, unflapped by the prescription at the School of the Incarnation for white blouse, navy skirt, or slacks for girls, white shirt and navy slacks for boys. With the dressers performing as both critics and artists, the basic material proved negotiable, the dress code itself an inspiring resource. Subtle accessorizing (just cautious enough to evade a bust) was one route, a use of artful supplement, perhaps so artful that only the wearer knew for sure. The school uniform itself proved multiform, its deformation the syntax of fashion-statement: the arrangement of collars and cuffs, the interpretation of *white*, the use or nonuse of sweater buttons, the number of rolls to take in a skirt waistband, form-fitting to baggy-slouching pants, knotting the tie, indulging the frisson of unseen underwear—all opportunities to perform with and within the uniform.

One student's gloss on this material culture casually and cannily fell into the form of an irregular couplet (I render the lines):

They know you're not going to totally conform
because half the time you don't want to be in perfect uniform.

¹ William L. Hamilton, "Cracking the Dress Code: How a School Uniform Becomes a Fashion Statement," *New York Times*, 19 February 1998, B1, B8.

My couplet form, appropriately, can only almost conform to standard formal prescription. What an exuberant playing out, by the teens, of art historian T. J. Clark's argument that "the work of art may have an ideology (in other words, those ideas, images, and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it *works* that material; it gives it a new form and at certain times that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology."²

A reading of activist formalism was one of the things lost in "the radical transformation of literary study that has taken place over the last decade" (i.e., into the early 1990s), described by George Levine in his introduction to *Aesthetics and Ideology*. Levine noted two related negative effects on formalist criticism: first, a view of literature as "indistinguishable from other forms of language" (as against the dominant assumption of the now nefarious "New Criticism"), and second, a more pointed hostility, "a virtually total rejection of, even contempt for, 'formalism.'" Levine himself, though meaning to be hospitable to a formalist criticism refreshed for the 1990s, slipped into negative descriptions and defensiveness.³ And no wonder. The most influential stories in criticism typically proffered the narrowest versions of literary form to serve accounts of its covert work.

Assaults on formalist criticism came from many quarters, some with critiques of social isolationism; others, of intellectual constraints. It was not attention to form per se that was discredited; it was the impulse to regard it as the product of a historically disinterested, internally coherent aesthetics. Critics as various as Harold Bloom and Terry Eagleton found common ground. Bloom indicted the "impasse of For-

² Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 13.

³ Levine, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Aesthetic," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 1-2. On Levine's ambivalence about the place of formalism in this reclamation see Heather Dubrow's essay in this issue and my comments in *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 227-8.

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malist criticism.”⁴ Eagleton’s influential essay “Ideology and Literary Form” described literary form as shaped and limited by the social forms of its historical moment and typically in the business, consciously or not, of recasting “historical contradictions into ideologically resolvable form.” Formalist criticism was useful only insofar as it teased out the “ideological struggles” that form was said to displace through its “naturalising, moralising, and mythifying devices.” “Marginalised yet . . . querulously present,” these struggles either compel “organic closures [to] betray their *constructing* functions” or rupture literary structure with “self-contradictory forms,” “fissures and hiatuses—formal displacements,” “formal discontinuities,” “formal dissonances” that are necessarily part of the work’s “historical meaning.”⁵

Exposing the fragile facticity of form and its incomplete cover-ups was the most powerful form-attentive criticism in the post- (and anti-) New Critical climate. To read for form was to read against formalism: no longer New Critical explication, the project was now New Historicist critique. Thus Jerome J. McGann’s influential but restrictive description (in its powerful “Romantic Ideology”): “Unlike non-aesthetic utterance,” poetic form offers social evaluations “to the reader *under the sign of completion*,” and while formalists take this sign “as their object of study,” the historicist needs to see both the “experience of finality and completion” and the “trans-historical” claim as the product of a specific discourse of “historical totality.” “Integral form is the sign of this seeming knowledge—and it persuades its reader that such a totality is not just a poetic illusion, but a truth.” Aesthetic form was totalized as an act of “ideological formation.” The “specialized” analysis of the “formal” will matter only insofar as it can, indeed “must,” find its “*raison d’être* in the socio-historical ground.”⁶ The project, as Catherine

⁴ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 12.

⁵ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (1976; London: Verso, 1978), 114, 124–5, 128–9. Theodor W. Adorno gives the rubric: “The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form” (*Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 6).

⁶ McGann, “Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism” (1979), in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 21–2; McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of

Gallagher describes it, was to undo the “false resolution” of aesthetic form, exposing “the original contradiction and the formal signs of its irresolvability.”⁷ Even with different theoretical stakes, the other powerful post–New Critical critique of formalism, deconstruction, shared this interest in contradictions. Paul de Man challenged the New Critical “theory of signifying form” (language as containing, reflecting, or referring to experience) not only with a critique of organic closure and verbal iconicity but also with a theory of “constituting form,” with which, inasmuch as it pointed toward a formalism tuned for social and ideological analyses, even Marxists could make peace.⁸

Ironically, American formalist criticism emerged about fifty years ago in revolt against another moribund critical institution, old historicism. The radical claim of the then “new” formalists was that the writing and reading of literature not only could not avoid but compelled a recognition of its formal arrangements—of form, in Jan Mukařovský’s words, as “an indirect semantic factor.”⁹ In *Theory of Literature*, a once influential polemic for “intrinsic study,” René Wellek and Austin Warren called for a reading of the “work of art” as “a whole system of signs, or structure of signs, serving a specific aesthetic purpose.” This approach answered their dissatisfaction with “the old dichotomy” between “form as the factor aesthetically active and a content aesthetically indifferent”; they wanted an account of the means by which words

Chicago Press, 1983), 3. Similarly, Fredric Jameson reads aesthetic form as ideologically produced acts “with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions,” indeed, “a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm” (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981], 79).

⁷ Gallagher, “Marxism and the New Historicism,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 39.

⁸ De Man, “The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism” (1971), in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 232. For the political critique of aesthetic formalization in de Man’s late essays see Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 62–3, 116–24.

⁹ “Poetic Designation and the Aesthetic Function of Language” (1938), in *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 68. For my fuller discussion of this history see the first chapter of *Formal Charges*.

become “aesthetically effective.”¹⁰ Against a then dominant emphasis on content (manifest or repressed), R. S. Crane similarly argued, with a tighter focus on poetry, that nothing “is matter or content merely, in relation to which something else is form. . . . Everything is formed, and hence rendered poetic.”¹¹ It is revealing that Geoffrey H. Hartman, who by the late 1960s felt ready to move “beyond formalism,” diagnosed his own addiction to it in 1975 as an inability to discover a “method to distinguish clearly what is formal and what is not.”¹² What happened to the radical gesture of this formalist intervention?

Designating aesthetic agency—the rationale of mid-twentieth-century formalist criticism—had a double force. Form was read as significant; yet warding off the old contextual claims meant courting a kind of isolationism, if not in the best practitioners, then in the general atmosphere. Hartman dedicated *Beyond Formalism* to arch-antiformalist Bloom.¹³ Seeking a critical mode for a Bloomlike “engaged reflection of personal myths and communal dreams,” he wanted “to go beyond formalism and to define art’s role in the life of the artist, his culture, and the human community” (ix), setting this goal against two institutions: first, the socialist view of formalism as the aesthetic opponent of social progress (ix), and second, the high New Critical “Yale formalism” (Wellek, Cleanth Brooks, W. K. Wimsatt), which seemed to isolate aesthetic form from human content. Hartman’s titular preposition (and proposition) was already rendered ironically, however, for the eponymous essay suggests that “to go beyond formalism” may be “against the nature of understanding”; the crucial question was whether it is possible to get “beyond formalism without going through the study of forms” (42). “There are many ways to transcend formalism, but the worst,” Hartman proposed, “is not to study forms” (56).

Having advertised his move beyond formalism, Hartman found

¹⁰ Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3d ed. (1942; New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), 140–1.

¹¹ Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 153.

¹² Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), vii. The essay “Beyond Formalism,” originally published in 1966, is reprinted in the collection thus titled (see n. 13).

¹³ Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958–1970* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970).

himself “more rather than less impressed . . . by how hard it is to advance ‘beyond formalism’ in the understanding of literature” (*Fate*, vii). He was not alone. Tony Bennett, noting Louis Althusser’s argument that “the real difference between art and science lies in the *specific form*” of presentation, remarked that the question “of specifying the features which uniquely distinguish works of literature from other ideological and cultural forms” is as much the “matter of prime importance” for Marxist analysis as it was for Russian formalism (their version of New Critical aesthetics).¹⁴ When Althusser and Pierre Macherey defined “literature” by its unique “capacity to reveal or rupture from within the terms of seeing proposed by the categories of dominant ideologies,” their task necessarily became “that of understanding the formal processes through which literary texts work upon and transform dominant ideological forms” (Bennett, 8). Even Eagleton was changing his earlier emphasis on the mystifications of form. By 1986 he was arguing that “a literary text is in one sense constrained by the formal principles of *langue*, but at any moment it can also put these principles into question.” This “dynamic,” he suggested, may be “most evident in a poem, which deploys words usually to be found in the lexicon, but by combining and condensing them generates an irreducible specificity of force and meaning.”¹⁵

Eagleton was doing no more, or less, than recovering old but still fertile ground. Resisting the isolationist formalism of early-century modernism, Georg Lukács had contended that “the truly social element in literature is the form.”¹⁶ Roland Barthes had insisted on the

¹⁴ Althusser, “A Letter on Art” (1966), in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 205; Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979), 122, 41–2. It is a matter of debate just how isolationist Russian formalism was; see Bennett, 108–9; my discussion in *Formal Charges*, 18–9; and Virgil Nemoianu’s essay in this issue.

¹⁵ Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 35–6.

¹⁶ Lukács, *The Evolution of Modern Drama*, quoted in Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 20. Remarking that this “is not the kind of comment which has come to be expected of Marxist criticism,” which “has traditionally opposed all kinds of literary formalism” as a reduction of literature “to an aesthetic game” (20), Eagleton cites Lukács as an instance of a Marxist criticism, with which he is sympathetic, that is interested in the complex shaping of forms by a relatively autonomous literary history, by “certain dominant ideological structures” in specific historical moments, and, within these, by “a specific set of relations between author and audience” (26; see 20–34).

necessary relation of (old) historicism to form. Writing in France in the 1950s, when it was not New Critical formalism but structuralism that challenged historicism, he sought to reconcile the terms that polemic, however heuristically, had put asunder: the “literary,” defined by a display of form, and “history,” the language of fact and idea. Historicizing formalist questions in terms that briefly interested even de Man, Barthes insisted that any “total criticism” had to pursue a “dialectical co-ordination” between “ideology,” the historically produced content, and “semiology,” the “science of forms [that] studies significations apart from their content.” His famous aphorism was that “a little formalism turns one away from History, but . . . a lot brings one back to it.” Correspondingly, if formalism is a “necessary principle” of analysis, it is also the case that “the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism.”¹⁷

To set formalist attention against claims of contextual determination may obscure the way formal choices and actions are enmeshed in, and even exercise agency within, networks of social and historical conditions. The essays in this issue of *MLQ* engage the challenges of historical criticism, but it is revealing that none tries to justify or rehabilitate formalist criticism in the year 2000 by cross-dressing it as a version of historicist criticism and pleading for it on that basis, as if that were the only legitimacy. Amid what James E. B. Breslin has termed “an historically informed formalist criticism,” these essays advance a sophisticated yet unembarrassed sense of literary value—and pleasure.¹⁸ This issue of *MLQ* is not really an intervention, in fact, as much as it is a recognition of tenacious interests. For in the wake of deconstruction and its evolution into New Historicism, there has persisted a formalist criticism, not burrowed in retreat in new critical streambeds but invigorated by and challenging the modern currents, even as it rereads the traditions of aesthetic theory—in particular, and repeatedly, Kant. In 1990 Garrett Stewart insisted that a “formalist . . . return

¹⁷ Barthes, “Myth Today” (1957), trans. Annette Lavers, in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 111–2. De Man describes a politics of form in Barthes that, like Russian formalism, treats its conspicuousness as significant. In epochs when social and political freedom is “curtailed,” an artist’s “choice of form become[s] problematic,” and form itself ceases to be “transparent” and becomes “an object of reflection”—a potentially “revolutionary action” (de Man, 234).

¹⁸ Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), xiv.

to textual theory” is necessary for “registering the *forms* of cultural dissemination in both the literary instance and its alternative discursive modes”; in the same year Peter J. Manning, sensitive to New Criticism’s strictures as well as to its general antipathy to Romanticism, stayed formalist but worked “to join formalism with wider concerns” in order to reconnect Romantic poetry to “the motives from which it springs and the social relations within which it exists.” Two years earlier Stephen Greenblatt had conceded, in the midst of a polemic for studying the borders of the literary domain where cultural transactions are presumably most intense and messy, both a yearning “to recover the close-grained formalism of my own literary training” and a recognition that “sustained, scrupulous attention to formal and linguistic design will remain at the center of literary teaching and study.”¹⁹

Greenblatt’s tone is elusive. Is he sadly resigned, or somewhat relieved? A dozen years after, Heather Dubrow opens her essay with the wry observation that “in the current critical climate, many scholars are far more comfortable detailing their sexual histories in print than confessing to an interest in literary form.” The essays in this issue of *MLQ* make one thing clear: while everyone is unhappy with the turn against form over the last two decades, everyone is unhappy in a different way. As Marshall Brown and I reviewed our colloquium, we noted how various the cases for “form,” “formalism,” and “formalist criticism” seemed in different hands.²⁰ Yet within this unpredictable variety of interests and approaches, it became clear that if the equation

¹⁹ Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 16; Manning, *Reading Romantics: Texts and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3; Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3–4.

²⁰ Some refinements of key words seem in order. First, reading for form does not imply advocacy of formalism, in the traditional political, literary, and critical sense of an ideologically toned disciplinary commitment that prioritizes and privileges form in relation to other possible locations of value. Nor do we evoke the recent school of American poetry known as the “New Formalism,” itself a reference to the New Formalists of the 1950s—both movements advertising political and cultural conservatism, with the more recent one set against free-verse, 1960s liberalism and in alliance with older European verse traditions. In reading for form in 2000, the contributors to this issue of *MLQ* share a concern both with how poetic form is articulated and valued, and “with the changing theories and practices of poetic form” (Breslin, xiv).

of “literary” criticism with “formalist” criticism, narrowly conceived, was no longer satisfactory, another lively equation was emerging: of attention to form, however defined, with “reading”—the activity featured in Hartman’s, Stewart’s, and Manning’s titles and powerfully acknowledged by Greenblatt. What Brown has said of the study of style—“Through their style, cultural expressions become literary by resisting the idealizing universals into which our ideologies otherwise slide”—is sharpened in the stylistic performance of the literary that we mean to call “form.”²¹

The readings for form that follow—“for” as attention to and as advocacy for such attention—show, if no consensus about what form means, covers, and implies, then a conviction of why it still has to matter. All share a sense that the reductive critique of formalism, in publication and pedagogy, has had unfortunate results, not the least a dulling of critical instruments and a loss of sensitivity to the complexity of literary form: its various and surprising work, its complex relation to traditions, and its interaction with extraliterary culture. “Reading for form” implies the activity as well as the object. Some of our contributors, J. Paul Hunter, Heather Dubrow, Robert Kaufman, and Ronald Levaio, focus on poetry, with a sense of how its events (as Derek Attridge writes) resist incorporation “into the kind of interpretation we habitually give to linguistic utterances”; they are not transparent but invite “apprehension as a formal entity, quite apart from its semantic import.”²² Yet their essays go further, suggesting how formal events in poetry also bear semantic import, especially when questions of form—literary and social—are at stake.

Hunter’s quarry is the Anglophone couplet, which most of us learned to read, in its eighteenth-century perfection, as a deft orchestration of binaries into epigrammatic concision. These well-wrought turns courted post-New Critical indictments, in both the writing and the reading, of ideological and political complicity with forces that cloaked repressive interests in discipline, restraint, and authority as

²¹ Brown, “Le Style Est l’Homme Même’: The Action of Literature,” *College English* 59, no. 7 (1997): 56; see also Brown, “Why Style Matters,” in *Turning Points: Essays in the History of Cultural Expressions* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 33–87.

²² Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), 311, 307.

naturalized harmony and unity. Hunter argues that binarist thinking, especially in the wake of national civil warfare, “is precisely what much eighteenth-century discourse (and most notably couplet discourse) opposes, corrects, or modifies.” In his lively analysis, the couplet emerges from its reputation as static verbal icon into a scene of action that merges or disrupts categories and complicates terms, unsettling the very ground of either-or binarism. Whether at work on the court, on gender relations, or on conceptual categories, couplet poetics finds rhetorical power not in epigrammatic closure but in deepening qualifications and refinements.

Dubrow’s point of entry is already suggested by Greenblatt’s uncomfortable inability to break with a reading for form. Situating order, architectural and social, in the context of contemporary political and social tensions, the Renaissance subgenre of the country house poem presents a critical opportunity to ponder what we would call the ideology of form. In a series of subtle readings Dubrow illuminates genre and occasion as complicated mirrors: the house is an aesthetic form that prides itself on hospitality and charity, yet is beset with nervousness about social inequality, hostile strangers, theft by neighbors, adultery by the lady, or neglect by the lord of the manor. Like Hunter, she finds the favored poetic form—the couplet—implicated, its tidy epigram miming the ideal of a house enclosed, protected and internally harmonious, but at times, like hospitality itself, shaping a syntax that opens through double negations what it would deny entry to by the rhetorical front door. The unpredictability of formalist semantics in this most form-sensitive of genres, Dubrow contends, is a case in point for formalist reading, which continues to matter not as a supplicant at the historical and political table but as a stylistic presence with its own force in the world.

To Kaufman, literary form is not ideological icon but public act. Like Dubrow, he starts with Kant, observing that a problematic figure has been mapped onto today’s “critique of Aesthetic Ideology.” In this critique, Kantianism names an essentialist, transcendental value for art, regarded as immune to historical, social, and material contingencies. It is the ideology that not only denies but also disguises the relationship between art and politics. Dubrow suggests that Kantian aesthetics is far more complicated and slippery, and Kaufman shows Frankfurt School

critics (in particular, Adorno) reading Kant as the progenitor of a constructivist theory of art. Arguing that this is a strong tradition in poetic form, Kaufman produces nuanced readings of Blake and Moriarty, mediated by Ginsberg, to show poetic form working as a mode of criticism, even critique. Strategically enlisting McGann's remark that Blake's assaults on all sorts of visual and poetic traditions render poetry "a form of action rather than a form of representation,"²³ Kaufman, like Hunter, sees poetic form as an event to "enable perception and critical thought." In Blake, in Ginsberg's self-conscious Blakeanism, and in Moriarty's conscious relation to these forerunners, Kaufman's subtle attention shows how experimentation and innovation work performatively against previous forms and formations.

When reading for form, a local focus may seem the most productive, even if played out through larger unities or historical contexts. But can "form" still have a compelling value when its field is epic poetry, or even nonpoetic genres—more often large, loose, and baggy—where terms such as *structure* and *discursive formation* may seem more apt? Catherine Gallagher, assessing the end run around "length" (the linear-temporal imperative) in the tendency of formalist criticism of the novel to read the spatial pattern, or atemporal stylistic detail; Ronald Levaio, reading the ethics of completion and incompleteness in *Paradise Lost*; Frances Ferguson, reading the refraction of eighteenth-century epistolarity in the free indirect style in *Emma*; Garrett Stewart, investigating the way a novelist such as Dickens globalizes the principles of syllepsis; Franco Moretti, analyzing canon formation in relation to the devices of popular fiction—all play out the stakes of what is evident in Hunter, Dubrow, and Kaufman: forms matter not just as local articulations, or even as local articulations radiating into and unsettling the ground on which they stand, but as constitutive of the works at large.

Gallagher sees the problem of novel formalism arising from the brevity of lyric concentrations that we learned to love from reading poetry. Shelleyan tradition limns poetic form against ideal forms, beyond the imperfect durations of time and history. Hence the fleet-

²³ McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), ix.

ing instant that, shorn of Shelley's transcendental claims, becomes Arnold's touchstone, Ruskin's gem, Pater's gemlike flame, Ransom's elegiac form of proto–New Criticism. The novel falls captive to this tradition, Gallagher observes, for the favored mode of reading is to discern patterns, repetitions and symmetries, forms, little and large, that emerge over and against temporal extension. She intervenes by theorizing length, proposing an unacknowledged dependence of such pattern-forms and their key sites of articulation on temporality—not as the opposite (the thing that form interrupts or arrests) but as the tenacious context of imminent flux, the “awful brevity” of the splendid moment celebrated in Pater's *Renaissance*. In Ransom, form even seems a merely funereal rather than a well-wrought urn. So too in modernist fiction: even as Joyce and Woolf privilege the epiphany and the rupture, they make these moments apprehensible only against a background of continuous succession, a narrative form that at once plays against and permeates these forms of brevity.

Levao probes the tension between the intensely realized moment and the imperatives of a larger pattern as the problem of *Paradise Lost*, in which theologically invested forms play against dramatic embodiments and the hierarchical sorting of obligations turns into an investigation of the motives, divine and human, behind such sortings. “*Paradise Lost* broods over this relation thematically and thematizes it formally,” he proposes, and it is no coincidence that this dynamic radiates into critical debate. Noting that the question “is reflected in equivocations about form itself, which promises an ascent from multiplicity to archetype while serving, for Milton and others, as the ground of individuation,” Levao concentrates this demanding argument on Adam's relation to the form of individuation that Milton calls “Eve,” a relation that shapes a drama of intimacy and its constitutive role in human identity. Tracking the consequences throughout the poem, Levao shows guiding assumptions gathering complications in their very repetition: hierarchy jostles with egalitarianism, symmetry with asymmetry, precision with imprecision, and promises of formal completion with discoveries of incompleteness. The poem's intricate and often conflicting formalisms, ranging from syntaxes to narrative framings and sequences, prove inextricable from the language of ethical investment, with the meeting of ethics and form generating a recur-

ring debate: whether the poem leads its reader to the form to end all forms, or to a meaningfully unfinished indeterminacy.

For Ferguson, this indeterminacy is not only the nature of fiction but also its seeming defiance of formalist criticism, narrowly described. Not only has poetry's formed language traditionally been treated as the antithesis of the novel's discursive method, but the novel's tendency to gesture toward a virtual, and sometimes actual, world of events has also attenuated its attraction to formalism as a closed system. Drawing on Foucauldian paradigms and sociological analyses, Ferguson boldly proposes that the novel has contributed only one genuinely and ultimately defining formal element to literature: the innovation, nearly patented by Austen, of "free indirect style," a language representing speech and thought in seeming elision of any particular authority, being everywhere at once and more or less continuous with the narrator's own voice. Taking the marriage-plot novel of female development as her general/generic subject, and, more specifically, *Emma*, Ferguson argues for an important Austenian innovation: with free indirect style, Austen rewrites the marriage plot from its eighteenth-century teleology into a form that is contingent precisely because it renders community consciousness as discontinuous from individual consciousness. The comic plot of "education" toward and for marriage is made problematic by the intervention of free indirect style, which, in Austen's hands, defends the individual and in so doing attenuates the very (ideo)logic of the marriage plot: the coincidence of communitarian and individual understandings.

Stewart, who insists that "the formalist imperative is to read, to read what is written as a form (and formation) of meaning," tests this imperative against what would seem most inhospitable, namely, colonial literature and postcolonial critique. Although his reading pleasures may seem a case in point for those who would storm the house of fiction, he has his sights set on a mode of narrative formalism in which local linguistic forms register macroeconomic anxieties. Arguing that literature is "constructed from within rather than dictated by overarching design," Stewart looks at the fine grains of one constitutive plank, syllepsis. (A famous example is one that Hunter's essay reads with similar interests, the description of Queen Anne at Hampton court: "Here thou, Great *Anna!* Whom three Realms obey, / Dost

sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes *Tea*” [*The Rape of the Lock*, 3.7–8].) Not just a phrasal device, this lexical reorientation of syntax (its main verb forking into double business) is a “formal principle” that Stewart sees as a rhetorical schooling of the reader into more comprehensive thought. His point of departure is the double-dealing of the title of Dickens’s study of mercantile power and collapse, *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation*—a semi-otic transfer from commodity text to commodity market. With meticulous attention to sylleptic agency in this novel and in Forster’s *Howards End*, Stewart tracks the subtle shifts between literal and figurative references, physical and immaterial frames—the local formal actions that imply ideologically freighted oppositions between the worldly and the eternal, the palpable and the invisible.

Moretti starts with the big picture, “literary history,” and then homes in on another instance of formal agency. Concerned, as Stewart is, with literary actions in larger economies, Moretti studies the marketplace, specifically, “the canon” (critical and classroom) and the sales list. Is there a formalist logic for what makes it and what doesn’t? With a masterful survey of the *fin de siècle* detective novel, he proposes the test case of the “clue.” Why does this element of narrative design earn respect as a form? Chiefly, Moretti proposes, because it organizes the fictional structure as a morphological circle in which a potentiality for clues invests every detail. If Stewart sees the local form invested with macroformations, Moretti takes larger morphology as the informer of the local. Whatever concrete variables there might be, this narrative function remains constant, and it is telling—at least for the liberal application of the lexicon of form that the study of fiction seems to invite—that Moretti’s friendly witness is Shklovsky, who says that in the mystery story “the structure” does not change. Moretti’s own critical form is not only narrative but also structural and visual. Meticulous fieldwork inspires him to visual as well as discursive mapping: the “tree” figure, displaying the variables of “two *formal* units”—the device and the genre—is “the real protagonist of this essay,” he cheerfully concedes. What of the other protagonist, or antagonist: history? Rather like a clue played large, form, Moretti suggests, is the repeatable element of literary history, its term of regular definition and duration. If the clue is the form that defines detective fiction,

form is what organizes literary history, without implying that its particular markers are inevitable.

Although all the essays described above are theoretically sophisticated, they are chiefly concerned with practical readings of form at work—in Pope, Pomfret, Dryden, Chudleigh, Jonson, Carew, Milton, Blake, Ginsberg, Moriarty, Austen, Shelley, Pater, Woolf, Dickens, Forster, Conan Doyle. What happens when theory becomes the primary subject of reading? Virgil Nemoianu and Ellen Rooney, for whom this is a disciplinary and professional devotion, take up the question for sustained investigation. Assuming a dialectic of theory with practice, they focus on the dialectics (or warfare) in the critical arena and assess its stakes. Nemoianu's frank advocacy articulates our common starting point, the aggressive antiformalism, indeed the demonizing of aesthetic form, that started to emerge in the 1980s and was powerfully in force in the early 1990s, provoking the panel discussion at MLA 97 that evolved into this issue of *MLQ*. Challenging the condemnation of aesthetic form and formalism, wielding an impressive range of international and interdisciplinary reference, and possessing a cogent historical sense of midcentury criticism that resists pat political explications, Nemoianu argues (in terms that may recall Hartman) that a better account of form is necessary not only for our profession but also for human self-understanding. Dismayed by the sweeping indictment of formalism, he shows how this totalizing is not only inconvenienced by far more various alliances—linking formalist practices (and form-attentive criticism) with opposition culture; with liberal, subversive, or radical actions—but also inconvenienced by the aesthetic complexities, multiplicities, and overdeterminations that have always characterized the most compelling events of form. A theory of form, Nemoianu contends, needs to acknowledge that politics and aesthetic form rarely line up in easy correspondences and that the case for “delight, love, play, gift, leisure” needs fuller, nonutilitarian analysis.

The conceptual agency of form that is argued by every essay in this issue—the way form shapes perceptions and critical thinking—subtends what Rooney calls the work and pleasure of reading. Like Nemoianu, she reads a debate: for Nemoianu, “hating and loving” formalism; for her, the implied *discontent* that haunts her title, “Form

and Contentment.” Her opening is in effect the headline for this issue: “My polemical aim is unambiguously to defend the problematic of form as essential to both literary and cultural studies and to tie that defense intimately to the figure of reading.” Through her own close readings of recent critical polemics, Rooney’s unembarrassed call is for a reinvigorated formalism, not only to enrich literary studies but also to open productive routes of commerce with cultural studies, and even to propel cultural theory out of its thematic ruts. Reading for form, she argues, is not the naive counterpart of theory but its interlocutor, its dark interpreter, its illuminating ally. Rooney is motivated by a sense that the pervasive turn away from the category of form itself “has left literary studies methodologically impoverished, cultural studies at sea, and theoretical practice stalled.” More fundamentally, it has left us all with an erosion of reading ability. Whether the textual object is literary, nonliterary, aural, visual, or broadly social, the ability to read is essential for discovering forms that are not known and judged in advance.