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The Affordances of Form

If a literary critic today set out to do a formalist reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, she would know just where to begin: with literary techniques both large and small, including the marriage plot, first-person narration, description, free indirect speech, suspense, metaphor, and syntax. Thanks to rich recent work on the history of the book, she might also consider the novel's material shape—its size, binding, volume breaks, margins, and typeface. But unlike formalists of a couple of generations before, she would be unlikely to rest content with an analysis of these forms alone. Traditional formalist analysis—close reading—meant interpreting all of the formal techniques of a text as contributing to an overarching artistic whole. A contemporary critic, informed by several decades of historical approaches, would want instead to take stock of the social and political conditions that surrounded the work's production, and she would work to connect the novel's forms to its social world. She would seek to show how literary techniques reinforced or undermined specific institutions and political relationships, such as imperial power, global capital, or racism. Along the way, our critic would most likely keep her formalism and her historicism analytically separate, drawing from close reading methods to understand the literary forms, while using historical research methods to analyze sociopolitical experience. These would seem to her to belong to separate realms and to call for different methods.

But would our critic be right to distinguish between the *formal* and the *social*? Consider the early scenes in *Jane Eyre*, where Brontë first introduces Lowood School. In the morning, a bell rings loudly to wake the girls. When it rings a second time, “all formed in file, two and two, and in that order descended the stairs.” On hearing a verbal command, the children move into “four semicircles, before four chairs, placed at the four tables; all held books in their hands.” When the bell rings yet again, three teachers enter and begin an hour of Bible reading before the girls march in to breakfast.

Although this new world feels overwhelming at first, Jane—quick-witted and obedient—soon achieves success. “In time I rose to be the first girl of the first class.”¹ Critics are used to reading Lowood’s disciplinary order as part of the novel’s content and context, interpreting the school experience as indispensable to Jane’s maturation, for example, or as characteristic of trends in nineteenth-century education.² But what are Lowood’s shapes and arrangements—its semicircles, timed durations, and ladders of achievement—if not themselves kinds of *form*?

This book makes a case for expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience like those of Lowood School. Broadening our definition of form to include social arrangements has, as we will see, immediate methodological consequences. The traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves. Formalist analysis turns out to be as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions as it is to reading literature. Forms are at work everywhere.

One might object, of course, that it is a category mistake to use the aesthetic term *form* to describe the daily routines of a nineteenth-century school. Surely the relation between literary and social forms is just an analogy, or an identity working at too a high level of abstraction—an expansion of the word *form* so broad as to make it meaningless. But a brief look at the history of the term suggests otherwise. Over many centuries, *form* has gestured to a series of conflicting, sometimes even paradoxical meanings. Form can mean immaterial idea, as in Plato, or material shape, as in Aristotle. It can indicate essence, but it can also mean superficial trappings, such as conventions—*mere forms*. Form can be generalizing and abstract, or highly particular (as in the form of *this* thing is what makes it what it is, and if it were reorganized it would not be the same thing). Form can be cast as historical, emerging out of particular cultural and political circumstances, or it can be understood as ahistorical, transcending the specificities of history.³ In disciplinary terms, form can point us to visual art, music, and literature, but it belongs equally to philosophy, law, mathematics, military science, and crystallography. Even within literary studies, the vocabulary of formalism has always been a surprising kind of hodge-podge, put together from rhetoric, prosody, genre theory, structural anthropology, philology, linguistics, folklore, narratology, and semiotics.

Chaotic though it seems, this brief conceptual history does make two things quite clear. First, form has never belonged only to the discourse of aesthetics. It does not originate in the aesthetic, and the arts cannot lay claim to either the longest or the most far-reaching history of the term. To

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bring the disciplinary techniques of Lowood together with the literary techniques of the novel is not then an arbitrary expansion of the notion of form, nor does it draw from outside the history of formalist thinking. Instead, an attention to both aesthetic and social forms returns us to the very heterogeneity at the heart of form's conceptual history. Second, all of the historical uses of the term, despite their richness and variety, do share a common definition: "form" always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*. Here, then, is where my own argument begins: with a definition of form that is much broader than its ordinary usage in literary studies. Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference.

Why adopt such a broad definition? The stakes, I want to suggest, are high. It is the work of form to make order. And this means that forms are the stuff of politics. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, I define politics as a matter of distributions and arrangements.⁴ Political struggles include ongoing contests over the proper places for bodies, goods, and capacities. Do working-class crowds belong in the public square? Do women belong in voting booths? Does earned income belong to individuals? What land belongs to Native Americans? Sorting out what goes where, the work of political power often involves enforcing restrictive containers and boundaries—such as nation-states, bounded subjects, and domestic walls. But politics is not only about imposing order on space. It also involves organizing time: determining prison and presidential terms, naturalization periods, and the legal age for voting, military service, and sexual consent. Crucially, politics also means enforcing hierarchies of high and low, white and black, masculine and feminine, straight and queer, have and have-not. In other words, politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping. And if the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form.

Literary and cultural studies scholarship has focused a great deal of attention on these various political ordering principles. We have typically treated aesthetic and political arrangements as separate, and we have not generally used the language of form for both, but we have routinely drawn on social scientific accounts of "structure"; we have certainly paid attention to national boundaries and hierarchies of race and gender. And it is a commonplace practice in literary studies to read literary forms in relation to social structures. So: the field already knows a great deal about forms. But it is a knowledge that is currently scattered across schools of thought and approaches. This book proposes to bring together the field's dispersed insights into social and aesthetic forms to produce a new formalist method.

Let me start by articulating five influential ideas about how forms work. These are ideas that have guided literary and cultural studies scholars over the past few decades, but they have remained largely implicit—and disconnected from one another:

- 1 *Forms constrain.* According to a long tradition of thinkers, form is disturbing because it imposes powerful controls and containments. For some, this means that literary form itself exercises a kind of political power. In 1674, John Milton justified his use of blank verse as a reclaiming of “ancient liberty” against the “troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming.”⁵ Avant-garde poet Richard Aldington made a similar claim in 1915: “We do not insist upon ‘free-verse’ as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as for a principle of liberty.”⁶ In our own time, critics—especially those in the Marxist tradition—have often read literary forms as attempts to contain social clashes and contradictions.⁷
- 2 *Forms differ.* One of the great achievements of literary formalism has been the development of rich vocabularies and highly refined skills for differentiating among forms. Starting with ancient studies of prosody, theorists of poetic form around the world have debated the most precise terms for distinct patterns of rhyme and meter, and over the past hundred years theorists of narrative have developed a careful language for describing formal differences among stories, including frequency, duration, focalization, description, and suspense.⁸
- 3 *Various forms overlap and intersect.* Surprisingly, perhaps, schools of thought as profoundly different from one another as the New Criticism and intersectional analysis have developed methods for analyzing the operation of several distinct forms operating at once. The New Critics, who introduced the close reading method that dominated English departments in the middle decades of the twentieth century, deliberately traced the intricacies of overlapping literary patterns operating on different scales, as large as genre and as small as syntax. Intersectional analysis, which emerged in the social sciences and cultural studies in the late 1980s, focused our attention on how different social hierarchies overlap, sometimes powerfully reinforcing one another—how for example race and class and gender work together to keep many African-American women in a discouraging cycle of poverty.⁹
- 4 *Forms travel.* Critics have pointed to two important ways that forms move. First, a range of recent literary theorists, including Wai-Chee

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Dimock, Frances Ferguson, and Franco Moretti, have noted that certain literary forms—epic, free indirect discourse, rhythm, plot—can survive across cultures and time periods, sometimes enduring through vast distances of time and space.¹⁰ Something similar is true, though less often acknowledged, for social forms. Michel Foucault draws our attention to the daily timetable, for example, which begins by organizing life in the medieval monastery, but then gets picked up by the modern prison, factory, and school.¹¹

The second way in which forms travel, critics suggest, is by moving back and forth across aesthetic and social materials. Structuralism, a school of thought that grew influential across the social sciences in the first half of the twentieth century, made the case that human communities were organized by certain universal structures. The most important of these were binary oppositions—masculine and feminine, light and dark—which imposed a recognizable order across social and aesthetic experiences, from domestic spaces to tragic dramas. Structuralism later came under fire for assuming that these patterns were natural and therefore inexorable, but one does not have to be a structuralist to agree that binary oppositions are a pervasive and portable form, capable of imposing their arrangements on both social life and literary texts. Some critics have also worried that aesthetic forms can exert political power by imposing their artificial order on political life. Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin argued against an embrace of totality in aesthetics, because it he believed it led to an embrace of totality in political communities.¹² More recent critics have often followed forms in the opposite direction: showing, for example, how a social form like a racial hierarchy moves from the political world into a novel, where it structures aesthetic experience.¹³

- 5 *Forms do political work in particular historical contexts.* In recent years, scholars interested in reviving an interest in form (sometimes called the “new formalists”) have sought to join formalism to historical approaches by showing how literary forms emerge out of political situations dominated by specific contests or debates. Since the late 1990s, literary critics like Susan Wolfson and Heather Dubrow have argued that literary forms reflect or respond to contemporary political conditions.¹⁴ Forms matter, in these accounts, because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context.

Forms: *containing, plural, overlapping, portable, and situated*. None of these ideas about form are themselves new, but putting them together will bring us to a new theory of form.

Affordances

How can form do so many different, even contradictory things? How can it be both political and aesthetic, both containing and plural, both situated and portable? To capture the complex operations of social and literary forms, I borrow the concept of *affordance* from design theory. *Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs.¹⁵ Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. Cotton affords fluffiness, but also breathable cloth when it is spun into yarn and thread. Specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own range of affordances. A fork affords stabbing and scooping. A door-knob affords not only hardness and durability, but also turning, pushing, and pulling. Designed things may also have unexpected affordances generated by imaginative users: we may hang signs or clothes on a doorknob, for example, or use a fork to pry open a lid, and so expand the intended affordances of an object.

Let's now use affordances to think about form. The advantage of this perspective is that it allows us to grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms—both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space. What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet *capable* of doing? Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities. Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, “a moment's monument,”¹⁶ while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. Forms are limiting and containing, yes, but in crucially different ways. Each form can only do so much.

To be sure, a specific form can be put to use in unexpected ways that expand our general sense of that form's affordances. Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social

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arrangements. An imaginative user, such as William Butler Yeats, deliberately pushes at the limits of formal constraints in “Leda and the Swan,” a sonnet that captures the single moment that launches the epic story of the Trojan War—at once gesturing to the sweep of epic while remaining powerfully constrained by the sonnet’s compact form.

Although each form lays claim to different affordances, all forms do share one affordance. Precisely because they are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns are iterable—portable. They can be picked up and moved to new contexts. A school borrows the idea of spectators in rows from ancient theater. A novelist takes from epic poetry the narrative structure of the quest. Forms also afford movement across varied materials. A rhythm can impose its powerful order on laboring bodies as well as odes. Binary oppositions can structure gendered workspaces as well as creation myths. While its meanings and values may change, the pattern or shape itself can remain surprisingly stable across contexts. But as they move, forms bring their limited range of affordances with them. No matter how different their historical and cultural circumstances, that is, bounded enclosures will always exclude, and rhyme will always repeat.

If forms lay claim to a limited range of potentialities and constraints, if they afford the same limited range of actions wherever they travel, and if they are the stuff of politics, then attending to the affordances of form opens up a *generalizable understanding of political power*. A panoptic arrangement of space, wherever it takes shape, will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power; a hierarchy will always afford inequality.

But specific contexts also matter. In any given circumstance, no form operates in isolation. The idea of affordances is valuable for understanding the aesthetic object as imposing its order among a vast array of designed things, from prison cells to doorknobs. Literary form does not operate outside of the social but works among many organizing principles, all circulating in a world jam-packed with other arrangements. Each constraint will encounter many other, different organizing principles, and its power to impose order will itself be constrained, and at times unsettled, by other forms. Rhyme and narrative may structure the same text; the gender binary and the bureaucratic hierarchy may coincide in a single workplace. Which will organize the other? It is not always predictable. New encounters may activate latent affordances or foreclose otherwise dominant ones. Forms will often fail to impose their order when they run up against other forms that disrupt their logic and frustrate their organizing ends, producing aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects. We can understand forms as abstract and portable organizing principles, then, but we also need to attend to the

specificity of particular historical situations to understand the range of ways in which forms overlap and collide.

In many cases, when forms meet, their collision produces unexpected consequences, results that cannot always be traced back to deliberate intentions or dominant ideologies. In a brief but familiar example, most women in academia experience a powerful tension between the biological “clock”—the years when the female body is capable of biological reproduction—and the tenure clock—the university’s timetable for evaluating probationary faculty. This is one reason why a disproportionately high number of women opt for academic jobs as adjuncts and part-timers.¹⁷ Since the tenure system predates the entry of women in any substantial numbers into the academy, these consequences do not flow from any particular patriarchal intention or ideology other than the assumption of an uninterrupted adult life.¹⁸ In other words, this clash of temporal forms does not result from an intention to keep women in their places; it is an unplanned collision between two temporal forms, one biological and the other institutional.

Even a prison cell, the grimmest of social forms, does not enforce its simple, single order in isolation. The cell itself is a straightforward enough form: it encloses bodies within surrounding walls. But the prison always activates other forms as well: prisoners are subjected to temporal patterns, including enforced daily rhythms of food, sleep, and exercise; educational trajectories; and the length of the prison term itself. They take part in networks that operate not only within a given prison, but also reach outside the confines of prison walls, including illegal smuggling rings, gangs, and correspondence networks. The latter—from Amnesty International to personal notes to the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”—have long been crucial forms in prisoners’ lives. And at the same time as prisoners are contained in cells, patterned in time, and linked to various networks, they are also subjected to numerous painful hierarchies, ranked according to the status of their crimes and their gender and sexual identities. As these forms overlap, some may disrupt the prison cell’s containing power. The enclosure of the cell itself does not readily afford expansion or breakdown, but the temporal form of the prison sentence affords shortening or lengthening. And one surprisingly literary form has occasionally cut short the time of a prison term: a story of remorse or redemption can sometimes prompt a pardon.¹⁹ Thus the arc of a narrative can in its own way pry open a cell’s enclosing walls.

This analysis of forms—constraining in different ways, bringing their affordances with them as they cross contexts, and colliding to sometimes unpredictable effect—points to a new understanding of how power works. And yet, one might object, if so many things count as forms, from sonnets

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to prison cells to tenure clocks, then the category is just too capacious. What in this account is *not* form? Is there any way outside or beyond form? My own answer is yes—there are many events and experiences that do not count as forms—and we could certainly pay close attention to these: fissures and interstices, vagueness and indeterminacy, boundary-crossing and dissolution. But I want to make the case here that these formless or antiformal experiences have actually drawn *too much* attention from literary and cultural critics in the past few decades.

That is, the field has been so concerned with breaking forms apart that we have neglected to analyze the major work that forms do in our world. We have tended to assume that political forms are powerful, all-encompassing, and usually simple in themselves: a sexist or racist regime, for example, splits the world into a crude and comprehensive binary, its stark simplicity—black and white, masculine and feminine—contributing to the regime's painful power. We have therefore learned to look for places where the binary breaks down or dissolves, generating possibilities that turn the form into something more ambiguous and ill-defined—formless. Scholars in recent years have written a great deal about indeterminate spaces and identities, employing such key terms as liminality, borders, migration, hybridity, and passing.²⁰ This work has been compelling and politically important, without any doubt, and it will surely continue to be productive to analyze formal failures, incompleteness, and indefinability. But while it may be possible to rid ourselves of particular unjust totalities or binaries, it is impossible to imagine a society altogether free of organizing principles. And too strong an emphasis on forms' dissolution has prevented us from attending to the complex ways that power operates in a world dense with functioning forms.

Perhaps this account of form still seems too abstract, too divorced from material conditions and the ways that power operates on and through embodied experience. A continued focus on affordances will help us here. The term *affordance* crosses back and forth between materiality and design. It certainly helps us to understand the capacities and limitations of materials. Wood affords hard, durable structures. It does not afford fluid streams or spongy softness. A wire affords connection and transmission, and chocolate affords structured shapes as well as a certain gooey viscosity. With affordances, then, we can begin to grasp the constraints on form that are imposed by materiality itself. One cannot make a poem out of soup or a panopticon out of wool. In this sense, form and materiality are inextricable, and materiality is determinant.

But patterns and arrangements also shape matter, imposing order on stone and flesh, sounds and spaces. Constraint moves in both directions.

Things take forms, and forms organize things. The prison cell cannot do its work without the hard materiality of metal or stone, but it also operates as an iterable way of organizing experience, a model of enclosure that can and does travel across many contexts. It is both a thing and a form. Henry S. Turner suggests that we can discover forms from two opposite starting-points: we can begin with the immaterial, abstract organizing principles that shape material realities, or we can begin with the concrete, particular material thing and abstract from it to general, iterable patterns and shapes.²¹ From either perspective, forms travel across time and space in and through situated material objects.²²

The relationship between materiality and form has long been of interest in literary studies. Critics have often assumed that the materiality of a text's content lends itself to certain literary forms: patterns of labor or rhythms of the body yielding certain repetitions in poetry, for example. In one recent essay, Stephanie Markovits argues that nineteenth-century literary writers in different genres often chose to write about diamonds because these objects are suited both to the "containment of lyric" thanks to their perfectly chiseled shapes, and to the motion of narrative, thanks to their extraordinary durability over time.²³ Or to put this in terms of affordances, the materiality of diamonds affords specific experiences of time, including stillness and durability, which the critic then reads as shaping the literary forms that incorporate them. There is a rich suggestiveness in this kind of analysis, but it is important to note that the materials described or evoked by literary texts do not determine their forms in the same way that stone determines durability. Literature is not made of the material world it describes or invokes but of language, which lays claims to its own forms—syntactical, narrative, rhythmic, rhetorical—and its own materiality—the spoken word, the printed page. And indeed, each of these forms and materials lays claim to its own affordances—its own range of capabilities. Every literary form thus generates its own, separate logic. The most common literary formalist reading method involves binding literary forms to their contents, seeking out the ways that each reflects the other, as Markovits does with diamonds. But a typical novel or poem will touch on so many different objects—diamonds and hair, chocolate and the ocean—that it could not possibly adjust its own forms to every material it incorporates. Thus a reading practice that follows the affordances of both literary forms and material objects imagines these as mutually shaping potentialities, but does not fold one into the other, as if the materiality of the extratextual world were the ultimate determinant.

Affordances point us both to what all forms are capable of—to the range of uses each could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those

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possibilities—and also to their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles. Ballot boxes, biological clocks, and lyric poems all take organizing forms. Each of these forms can be repeated elsewhere, and each carries with it a certain limited range of affordances as it travels. But a form does its work only in contexts where other political and aesthetic forms also are operating. A variety of forms are in motion around us, constraining materials in a range of ways and imposing their order in situated contexts where they constantly overlap other forms. Form emerges from this perspective as transhistorical, portable, and abstract, on the one hand, and material, situated, and political, on the other.

Rethinking Formalisms

With affordances in mind, we can see how forms can be at once containing, plural, overlapping, portable, and situated. But every major formalist tradition has limited its definition of form in a way that has missed or excluded one or more of these affordances. For example, we have long known that the New Critics missed something important when they understood literary forms as entirely separate from a situated and material social world. They overlooked the ways in which formal constraints might matter politically; they did not care that forms took shape in specific historical circumstances. But the New Criticism was also interested in some of the affordances of form that have been missing from other theories. In literary and cultural studies, we have a much less refined vocabulary for the differences between social forms than we have for aesthetic ones. Certainly we know that racial hierarchies and walled enclosures organize social groups in different ways, but we have not developed a language for those differences. The New Criticism, with its interest in the differences between forms, can actually point the way forward here, inviting us to develop a richer and more precise terminology for the work of social forms. The New Critics also showed that it is difficult—if not impossible—to exhaust the dense interweaving of formal elements in a short lyric poem. And if it is a challenge to identify and analyze the shaping elements of a single sonnet, then it is certainly impossible to capture the patterns constitutive of an entire society with a handful of categories, such as race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and disability. Thus the New Critics' focus on the extraordinary plurality of overlapping forms could prompt us to expand the logic of intersectional analysis dramatically, continuing to take the structures of race, class, and gender extremely seriously, but tracking the encounters of these with many other kinds of forms, from enclosures to networks to narrative resolutions.

The politically minded “new formalisms” that have emerged in literary studies recently have also overlooked one of form’s crucial affordances. These critics have insisted on situating literary forms in particular political contexts. Mostly, they have followed one of two paths. Some have read literary forms as legible reflections of social structures. Herbert F. Tucker, for example, reads the meter of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem, “The Cry of the Children,” as revealing the uncomfortable disjuncture between the embodied time of human life and the jolting experience of factory labor. Barrett Browning’s “stop-and-start versification mimics the strain and clatter of steam-driven machinery.”²⁴ A second group casts literary form less as a reflection of a specific social context than as a deliberate *intervention*. Susan Wolfson argues, for example, that the Romantic poets were hardly unknowing purveyors of a “romantic ideology” that masked political struggle in unified “organic forms,” as has often been charged: instead, she argues, they were fully aware of the constructedness of literary unities and purposefully deployed formal strategies to investigate problems of ideology, subjectivity, and social conditions.²⁵ Both groups of new formalists read literary form as epiphenomenal, growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes. Thus, neither camp takes account of one of forms’ affordances: the capacity to endure across time and space. From the gender binary to rhyme and from prison cells to narrative prose, aesthetic and social forms outlive the specific conditions that gave birth to them: the scroll does not altogether disappear with the codex but in fact reemerges with surprising pervasiveness in the age of the Internet; the quest structure of ancient epic remains available to the contemporary novelist. None of these forms spring up anew in response to particular social facts but instead hang around, available for reuse. In this sense, forms are not outgrowths of social conditions; they do not belong to certain times and places.

And indeed, as sociologist Marc Schneiberg argues, it is precisely the endurance of “holdover” forms that can make a society promisingly plural, scattered with alternative ways of organizing resources and goods that could at any moment give rise to more hopeful arrangements. For example, in the 1950s when large, private, for-profit corporations started to dominate the US economic landscape, electricity—crucial to the whole economy—was delivered in significant quantities by local, state-owned enterprises and cooperatives. Every day, when corporate moguls turned on the lights, they remobilized the form of cooperative ownership. The story of US capitalism is therefore not only a deep-rooted dialectical struggle between capital and labor, but also “a path littered with elements or fragments of more or less developed systems of alternatives—a path ripe for exploitation,

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institutional revitalization and assembly, and containing within it structural possibilities for alternatives.”²⁶ What would enrich and deepen the “new formalism,” then, is attention to the *longues durées* of different forms, their portability across time and space.

Genre theory, too, could benefit from more attention to the portability of forms. For many critics, the terms *form* and *genre* are synonymous or near-synonymous.²⁷ But this book argues that they can be differentiated precisely by the different ways in which they traverse time and space. Genre involves acts of classifying texts. An ensemble of characteristics, including styles, themes, and marketing conventions, allows both producers and audiences to group texts into certain kinds. Innovations can alter those expectations: an experimental epic might invite readers to expand their sense of the genre’s themes, while the introduction of print extends and transforms a folktale’s audience. Thus any attempt to recognize a work’s genre is a historically specific and interpretive act: one might not be able to tell the difference between a traditional folktale and a story recently composed for children or to recognize a satire from a distant historical moment.²⁸

Forms, defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements, have a different relation to context: they can organize both social and literary objects, and they can remain stable over time. One has to agree to read for shapes and patterns, of course, and this is itself a conventional approach. But as Frances Ferguson argues, once we recognize the organizing principles of different literary forms—such as syntax, free indirect speech, and the sonnet—they are themselves no longer matters of interpretive activity or debate: “Even if you failed to notice that the sonnet that Romeo and Juliet speak between them was a sonnet the first time you read Shakespeare’s play, you would be able to recognize it as such from the moment that someone pointed it out to you. . . . It could be regularly found, pointed out, or returned to, and the sense of its availability would not rest on agreements about its meaning.”²⁹ Similarly, it is difficult not to agree on the shape of the classroom or the schedule of the prisoner’s day, the hierarchy of a bureaucratic organization or the structure of a kinship system. There is certainly some abstraction entailed here, but once we have agreed to look for principles of organization, we will probably not spend much time disputing the idea that racial apartheid organizes social life into a hierarchical binary, or that nation-states enforce territorial boundaries. More stable than genre, configurations and arrangements organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter what their context or audience. Forms thus migrate across contexts in a way that genres cannot. They also work on different scales, as small as punctuation marks and as vast as multiplot narratives or national boundaries. Genres,

then, can be defined as customary constellations of elements into historically recognizable groupings of artistic objects, bringing together forms with themes, styles, and situations of reception, while forms are organizations or arrangements that afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts.

So far, then, we have seen that the New Criticism missed the political power and the situatedness of constraining forms, intersectional analysis has overlooked the extraordinary plurality of forms at work in social situations, and the new formalists and genre theorists have too often neglected the capacity of forms to endure across time and space. Let us think finally about what has been missing from the Marxist tradition, the most complex and robust school of formalist thinking in literary and cultural studies.

Many Marxist thinkers, from Georg Lukács and Pierre Macherey to Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti, have cast literary form as an ideological artifice, a neat structuring of representation that soothes us into a false sense of order, preventing us from coming to terms with a reality that always exceeds form. Hayden White, for example, argues that narrative form teaches people to live in “an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destinies as social subjects.”³⁰ White contrasts reality—which he calls “social formations”—with the unreal coherence of narrative form. But if we understand social formations—such as the gender binary and the prison timetable—as themselves organizing forms, then we can see that White’s real-unreal distinction does not hold. Literary forms and social formations are equally real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally *unreal* in being artificial, contingent constraints. Instead of seeking to reveal the reality suppressed by literary forms, we can understand sociopolitical life as itself composed of a plurality of different forms, from narrative to marriage and from bureaucracy to racism.

The Marxist emphasis on aesthetic form as epiphenomenal—as secondary—has some distorting effects. First, it prevents us from understanding politics as a matter of form, and second, it assumes that one kind of form—the political—is always the root or ground of the other—the aesthetic. Let me offer an example of what it would mean to read literary forms not as epiphenomenal responses to social realities but as forms encountering other forms.

The gender binary is a form that can impose its order on the home, the laboratory, the prison, dress, and many other facts of social life. Now let’s consider an encounter between the gender binary and a narrative, Thomas Hughes’s best-selling novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857). The narrative

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begins by establishing a fiercely masculine world: the all-boy Rugby School, which is a training-ground for Christian colonial power.³¹ Tom, the protagonist, undergoes a series of adventures: a race, a football match, a fight with bullies. In every case, he succeeds by standing firm, and as a result the first half of the novel becomes remarkably repetitive, testing the hero in the same way over and over again. He meets each challenge, like “all real boys,” by refusing to give ground.³² But the narrative form of *Tom Brown’s School-days* takes an odd turn halfway through. It becomes more narratively interesting, and also, strangely, suddenly feminine. The wise headmaster Thomas Arnold decides that Tom and his friends must become more mature. He assigns Tom a new boy to look after, “a slight pale boy, with large blue eyes and light fair hair, who seemed ready to shrink through the floor . . . would be afraid of wet feet, and always getting laughed at, and called Molly, or Jenny, or some derogatory feminine nickname” (217–18). Saddled with responsibility for another, Tom becomes anxious and learns to submit to God. He is so careful of the younger boy’s welfare that he becomes feminine himself, “like a hen with one chick” (231). If the hero is victorious in the first half because he manfully withstands a series of assaults, the second half turns him into a pliable, recognizably feminine character: yielding, submissive, and open to alterity. The narrative suddenly becomes a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of development, filled with lessons learned and changes in the protagonist’s outlook and values.

What is going on here? One could say that Thomas Hughes wanted a narratively rich resource like the *Bildungsroman* to transform his repetitive, static story of boyish adventures into a more satisfying arc. The gender binary would have come in handy for this purpose, since the opposite of the brave, unyielding masculine character was the anxious, feminine one, open to change in precisely the way required for *Bildung*. According to this account, Hughes would have incorporated femininity into the text as an aftereffect of his narrative desires. Conversely, we could argue that because he valued a submissive Christianity, Hughes gravitated to the yielding character of the *Bildungsroman*, tractable in a way that fell on the feminine side of the gender binary, and adopted the narrative form of the pliable character as an aftereffect of his religious convictions. We don’t know which came first. What we do know is that both the literary and the social form—*Bildung* and the gender binary—preexist the text in question. Both move from other sites into this text, carrying their own ways of organizing experience with them. While we might speculate about which form is primary, or about Hughes’s own motivations, the text itself shows us something interesting about what happens when narrative form encounters the gender

binary and the two begin to operate together. In fact, a predictable, generalizable hypothesis about form unfolds from this collision, regardless of the author's intentions or the origins of either form. As long as pliability—the susceptibility to development—falls on the feminine side of the gender binary, the *Bildungsroman* will have to be a feminine genre, even when its protagonists are male.

Most Marxist formalist critics would approach the narrative form of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* as the working out of an ideological position or as an “abstract of social relationships.”³³ Most politically minded new formalists would read the text as a response to the immediate social world around it. The formalism that emerges here is different: I read narrative and gender as two distinct forms, each striving to impose its own order, both traveling from other places to the text in question, and neither automatically prior or dominant. One might say that I am flipping White's terms upside down: rather than hunting for the buried *content of the form*, I propose here to track *the forms of the content*, the many organizing principles that encounter one another inside as well as outside of the literary text. Instead of assuming that social forms are the grounds or causes of literary forms, and instead of imagining that a literary text has *a* form, this book asks two unfamiliar questions: what does each form afford, and what happens when forms meet?

From Causation to Collision

The first major goal of this book is to show that forms are everywhere structuring and patterning experience, and that this carries serious implications for understanding political communities. This starting-point entails a *Gestalt* shift for literary studies. It calls for a new account of politics and of the relations between politics and literature. In theory, political forms impose their order on our lives, putting us in our places. But in practice, we encounter so many forms that even in the most ordinary daily experience they add up to a complex environment composed of multiple and conflicting modes of organization—forms arranging and containing us, yes, but also competing and colliding and rerouting one another. I will make the case here that no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes all others. This means that literary forms can lay claim to an efficacy of their own. They do not simply reflect or contain prior political realities. As different forms struggle to impose their order on our experience, working at different scales of our experience, aesthetic and political forms emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane. I will show in this book that aesthetic and political forms may be nested inside one another,

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and that each is capable of disturbing the other's organizing power.

This is not to say, however, that the world of forms is a happy free-for-all. The second major goal of the book is to think about the ways that, together, the multiple forms of the world come into conflict and disorganize experience in ways that call for unconventional political strategies. Critics and theorists have tended to assume that powerful social institutions integrate and homogenize experience; they put into practice coherent ideologies that organize and constrain experience. This book puts an emphasis on social *disorganization*, exploring the many ways in which multiple forms of order, sometimes the results of the same powerful ideological formation, may unsettle one another. And yet, disorganization is not always better than order, and we will see how competing forms can sometimes produce pain and injustice as troubling as any consolidation of power.

Approaching form in this pluralizing way to include both social and aesthetic forms, and arguing that no single form dominates or organizes all of the others, moves us away from one of the deepest political convictions in the field: that ultimately, it is deep structural forces such as capitalism, nationalism, and racism that are the truly powerful shapers of our lives. Critics are not wrong to hold on to such explanations: our lives are certainly organized by powerful structuring principles, and it would be a grave mistake to overlook them. But at the same time I would argue that an exclusive focus on ultimate causality has not necessarily benefited leftist politics. It has distracted us from thinking strategically about how best to deploy multiple forms for political ends.

My work has been influenced here by Brazilian legal theorist and politician Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who makes the case that too strong an analytic emphasis on deep structures is disabling for radical politics. It limits our attention and our targets to a small number of the most intractable factors, factors so difficult to unsettle that most people abandon the attempt altogether. What if we were to see social life instead as composed of "loosely and unevenly collected" arrangements, "a makeshift, pasted-together" order rather than a coherent system that can be traced to back to a single cause? Unger argues that such an approach would draw attention to the artificiality and contingency of social arrangements and so open up a new set of opportunities for real change by way of feasible rearrangements.³⁴ Like Unger, Jacques Rancière too draws attention to the radical potential that lies in acts of rearrangement.³⁵

The formalism I propose here draws from Unger and Rancière to shift attention away from deep causes to a recognition of the many different shapes and patterns that constitute political, cultural, and social experience.

I draw attention in particular to the ways that different arrangements can collide to strange effect, with minor forms sometimes disrupting or rerouting major ones. In a context of many overlapping forms, the most significant challenge for political actors is the fact that complicating any single form one might advocate are multiple organizing principles always already at work, often clashing and interrupting and rerouting one another. These overlaps open up unfamiliar opportunities for political action and show why the most effective route to social change might not be traditional ideology critique, which aims to expose the false and seductive discourses and cultural practices that prevent us from recognizing human unfreedom, that universalize and naturalize the oppressive social structures that stand in the way of emancipation. If forms always contain and confine, and if it is impossible to imagine societies without forms, then the most strategic political action will not come from revealing or exposing illusion, but rather from a careful, nuanced understanding of the many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern social experience.

Carolyn Lesjak has recently argued against the version of formalism I articulate here, because she sees it as a recipe for political quietism.³⁶ But in fact the primary goal of this formalism is radical social change. All politics, including revolutionary political action, will succeed only if it is canny about deploying multiple forms. Revolutions must mobilize certain arrangements, certain organized forms of resistance—the takeover of the public square, the strike, the boycott, the coalition. And any redistribution of the world’s wealth, which I strongly favor, must follow some kind of organizing principle. Marx’s classic slogan, “From each according to one’s ability; to each according to one’s need,” is a careful balancing of inputs and outputs, a structural parallelism that might well govern the organization of energies and distributions in a radical and just new order. Which forms do we wish to see governing social life, then, and which forms of protest or resistance actually succeed at dismantling unjust, entrenched arrangements?

My focus on the movement and assembly of forms prompts me to rely on a kind of event I call the “collision”—the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology. I offer many examples of such collisions, in part to unsettle the power of another explanatory form in literary and cultural studies: the dialectic. Literary and cultural studies has of course long been influenced by Marx’s dialectical materialism, and the structuralists, by identifying binary oppositions as a basic structure of social life, broadened dialectical thinking beyond Marxism within the field. Indeed, since the structuralist moment, it has been easy to spot dialectical structures at work everywhere, their dynamic op-

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positional energies providing the animating force behind historical change: “the dialectic of good and evil, but also that of subject and object; the dialectic of rich and poor and also that of male and female or black and white; the dialectic of Right and Left, but also of poetry and prose, high culture and mass culture, science and ideology, materialism and idealism, harmony and counterpoint, color and line, self and other, and so on. . . .”³⁷ But while it is no doubt true that much painful historical experience has emerged out of deep social contradictions, I argue in this book that the binary opposition is just one of a number of powerfully organizing forms, and that many outcomes follow from other forms, as well as from more mundane, more minor, and more contingent formal encounters, where different forms are not necessarily related, opposed, or deeply expressive, but simply happen to cross paths at a particular site. Suspending the usual models of causality thus produces new insight into the work of forms, both social and aesthetic.

Narrative

The form that best captures the experience of colliding forms is narrative. It is by no means the only form I will use or examine in this book, but it is a particularly helpful one for the analysis of forms at work. What narrative form affords is a careful attention to the ways in which forms come together, and to what happens when and after they meet. Narratives are especially appealing for a skeptical formalist reader because they tend to present causality metonymically, through sequences of events, rather than by positing some originary cause. They afford “conjoining,” to use David Hume’s words, rather than “necessary connexion.”³⁸ Narratives are valuable heuristic forms, then, because they can set in motion multiple social forms and track them as they cooperate, come into conflict, and overlap, without positing an ultimate cause.

Since social forms can move across contexts, taking their range of affordances with them, they can reveal their potentialities in fiction as well as nonfiction. We saw gender at work in *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*. As a formalist reader, I put my stress not on the fact that gender is a social fact being conveyed or registered by the literary text, but that it is a binary form that *carries its affordances with it into the novel*. Bruno Latour mentions in passing that fiction writers often do better than sociologists at capturing social relations because they are free to experiment, offering “a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act.”³⁹ Like Latour, I treat fictional narratives as productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding activity of multiple social forms.

My interest in the collision and unfolding of forms prompts me to pay an unusually serious kind of attention to plot. Not all plots are equally interesting, and I focus most of my attention here on a few extraordinary ones. Sophocles's *Antigone*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, and David Simon's *The Wire* present the movement of forms in exceptionally shrewd and unconventional ways that expand a conventional sense of how social worlds work. I spend time in this book describing narrative unfolding in each of these works.

This may seem like a surprising approach for a formalist reader. Following the plot has rarely been considered a sophisticated or valuable interpretive practice by any literary school, and describing the movement of narrative events might risk what New Critic Cleanth Brooks most strongly decried as the "heresy of paraphrase." For Brooks, literary objects are unlike other texts because they are organized by a "principle of unity" that ultimately harmonizes unlike and sometimes conflicting elements—rhythms, images, connotations—into a balanced whole. The problem with paraphrase, in his view, is that simple statements or propositions about the world always fail to capture the poem's subtle interactions among various parts.⁴⁰ In the next chapter of this book, I will subject Brooks's insistence on unity to critique. But in the meanwhile, I want to suggest that my enthusiastic embrace of plot paraphrase does take up his New Critical project in one specific way: plot is difficult to reduce to a single message or statement, and as a form it too mobilizes the subtle interrelations of multiple elements. Unlike a taxonomic chart that organizes forms into separate categories, narrative privileges the interaction of forms over time. Paraphrasing plotted narrative thus yields an irreducible complexity that is ironically consonant with the aims and values of the New Critics.

To return to *Jane Eyre*, for example, we can read the section that deals with Lowood School as a thoughtful investigation of how disciplinary forms can unfold in intricate interrelation, their patterning of experience capable of crossing back and forth between fiction and the social world. Sometimes the school's forms work perfectly together: a timed bell signals a shift in spatial order; a student who obediently follows both spatial and temporal arrangements successfully climbs the ranks. But not always: an unjust punishment by the top of the school's patriarchal hierarchy gives rise to a dissident, nonpatriarchal network as Miss Temple, Helen Burns, and Jane Eyre come together to create a new social form, a triadic "counter-family."⁴¹ In the sheltered privacy of Miss Temple's room, other forms then come into play. Miss Temple invites Jane to defend herself against the accusations of Mr Brocklehurst according to the rules set forth

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by courts of law. Jane gives her own testimony “coherently” and in a “restrained and simplified” manner that convinces her audience of her innocence and allows her to be publicly cleared (83). Thus a clandestine network of women, a closed room, the rules of the courtroom, and a newly organized and controlled kind of storytelling come together to resist Mr Brocklehurst’s authority.

This interaction of forms also brings with it some strange side effects. It throws into an odd kind of disarray another form—the binary division between public and private—as the secret courtroom, which joins intimate storytelling with the adoption of impersonal, public rules, permits a public exoneration of Jane. The hierarchy of the school, too, becomes oddly double, emerging as both enabling and tyrannical, since Jane’s exoneration gives her the confidence to climb Lowood’s ladder, while at the same time refusing Mr Brocklehurst the power that is supposed to derive from his place at the top of the same ladder. Meanwhile, the model of the courtroom teaches Jane how to tell stories that work for her own ends—carefully arranged and simplified to win over audiences. Thus the plotted form of the narrative itself takes shape at the intersection of a number of other forms—a hierarchy, an enclosed space, a network, and a set of legal rules.

This is an example of a reading practice that does not fit any familiar formalism. But it draws from all of them.

Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network

Organizing this book are four major forms. These are by no means the only forms, but they are particularly common, pervasive—and also significant. Though we have not always called them forms, they are the political structures that have most concerned literary and cultural studies scholars: bounded *wholes*, from domestic walls to national boundaries; temporal *rhythms*, from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time; powerful *hierarchies*, including gender, race, class, and bureaucracy; and *networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation. All of these have resonant corollaries in literature and literary studies: the bounded whole has long been a model for lyric poetry and narrative closure; rhythmic tempos organize poetic meter and sometimes literary history itself; hierarchies organize literary texts’ investments in certain values and characters over others; and networks link national cultures, writers, and characters.

Each chapter takes up one of these forms as it organizes literary works, social institutions, and our knowledge of both literature and the social—

that is, scholarly conversations in the field. For each of the major forms we will encounter in this book, I will ask four sets of questions:

- 1 What specific order does each form impose? The chapters that follow make the case that simply attending carefully to the affordances of each form produces some surprising new conclusions: for example, that what we call narrative closure does not in fact enclose, and that one of the most famous of the supposedly formalist New Critics paid not too much but too little attention to lyric form.
- 2 How has scholarly knowledge itself depended on certain organizing forms to establish its own claims, and how might a self-consciousness about scholarly forms shift the arguments that literary and cultural studies scholars make? I spend time here showing how some of the most determinedly antiformalist scholars have necessarily depended on organizing forms in their own arguments.
- 3 How should we understand the relationship between literary and political forms? Moving beyond the practice of reading aesthetic forms as indexes of social life, I consider ways in which literary and social forms come into contact and affect one another, without presuming that one is the ground or cause of the other.
- 4 Finally, what political strategies—what tactics for change—will work most effectively if what we are facing is not a single hegemonic system or dominant ideology but many forms, all trying to organize us at once? If politics operates through different kinds of forms—spatial containers, repetitions and durations over time, vertical arrangements of high and low, networks of interconnection—then resistance to one of these may not emancipate us from the others. It might even establish or reinforce the power of another form. The most significant and challenging claim of this book is that many, many forms are organizing us at all times. Where exactly, then, can we locate the best opportunities for social change in a world of overlapping forms? Can we set one form against another or introduce a new form that would reroute a racial hierarchy or disturb exclusionary boundaries? I argue that we need a fine-grained formalist reading practice to address the extraordinary density of forms that is a fact of our most ordinary daily experience.

A great variety of formal examples will make their appearances in this book: theme parks and management hierarchies, classical tragedies and

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well-wrought urns, literary history and gender theory. This wide-ranging array establishes the portability of the method, showing that this approach can productively cross sites and institutions, from medieval convents to modernist sculpture, from the early American postal system to postcolonial criticism. Though I will draw many examples from Victorian Britain because this is the field I know best, this is a project that necessarily carries us far from any given period of literary or cultural study.

A final chapter will offer a surprising, even counterintuitive, paradigm for bringing all four major forms together. HBO's remarkable recent television series, *The Wire* (2002–2008), conceptualizes social life as both structured and rendered radically unpredictable by large numbers of colliding social forms, including bounded wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks. Dependent on a narrative logic that traces the effects of each formal encounter on the next, it refuses to posit a deep, prior, metaphysical model of causality to explain its world. By tracking vast numbers of social patterns as they meet, reroute, and disrupt one another, *The Wire* examines the world that results from a plurality of forms at work. I argue that this series could provide a new model for literary and cultural studies scholarship.

Intended to act as a methodological starting-point, this book proposes a way to understand the relations among forms—forms aesthetic and social, spatial and temporal, ancient and modern, major and minor, like and unlike, punitive and narrative, material and metrical. Its method of tracking shapes and arrangements is not confined to the literary text or to the aesthetic, but it does involve a kind of close reading, a careful attention to the forms that organize texts, bodies, and institutions. “Close but not deep,” to borrow Heather Love's elegant formulation, this is a practice that seeks out pattern over meaning, the intricacy of relations over interpretive depth.⁴² And yet, at the same time, this is also a method that builds on what literary critics have traditionally done best—reading for complex interrelationships and multiple, overlapping arrangements. I argue that it is time to *export* those practices, to take our traditional skills to new objects—the social structures and institutions that are among the most crucial sites of political efficacy. I seek to show that there is a great deal to be learned about power by observing different forms of order as they operate in the world. And I want to persuade those who are interested in politics to become formalists, so that we can begin to intervene in the conflicting formal logics that turn out to organize and disorganize our lives, constantly producing not only painful dispossessions but also surprising opportunities.