

Form and Explanation

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What does form explain? More often than not, when it comes to literary criticism, form explains everything. Where form refers “to elements of a verbal composition,” including “rhythm, meter, structure, diction, imagery,” it distinguishes ordinary from figurative utterance and thereby defines the literary *per se*.¹ Where form refers to the disposition of those elements such that the work of which they are a part mimes a “symbolic resolution to a concrete historical situation,” it distinguishes real from virtual phenomena and thereby defines the task of criticism as their ongoing adjudication.² Both forensic and exculpatory in their promise, form’s explanations have been applied to circumstances widely disparate in scale, character, and significance. This is nothing new, but a recent flurry of debates identifying new varieties of form has thrown the unruliness of its application into relief. Taken together, they suggest that to give an account of form is to contribute to the work of making sense of linguistic meaning, aesthetic production, class struggle, objecthood, crises in the humanities and of the planet, how we read, why we read, and what’s wrong with these queries of how and why. In this context, form explains what we cannot: what’s the point of us at all?

Contemporary partisans of form maintain that their high opinion of its exegetical power is at once something new in the field and the field’s

1. René Wellek, “Concepts of Form and Structure in Twentieth-Century Criticism,” *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, Conn., 1963), p. 55.

2. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), p. 117.

own core—a kind of going back to basics, as if *form* ever enjoyed the authority of an uncontested term. For some critics, the very elasticity of the concept suits it for a range of phenomena understood to have bounded patterns, from sonnet sequences to factory timetables; this expansive view effects a certain traveling outward of an aesthetic conception of form to domains usually covered by other areas of study. At the same time, and in an effort at once to bridle the number of form's names and to bolster its explanatory purchase, other critics have turned to the sciences in search of a compelling isomorphism between what form can mean in *that* context and what it already does mean to literary study. Thus evolutionary perspectives on the development of the novel, along with genetic maps of generic codes, inquiries into the cognitive habits of live readers and fictional characters, and computationally derived topic models of clustered words aspire to ground the speculative flights of the humanities with some empirical gravity. In other words, the appeal of these modes of reading lies in their bid to substantiate the largely intuitive claims of humanistic method. The name usually given to this ambition is interdisciplinarity.

We propose to take something different from the sciences—namely, the conviction that explanations are *inquiry relative*—in order to argue two points. The first is that there is no reason to maintain or to desire a consistent use of the term *form* across the disciplines or even, perhaps, within a single discipline. Indeed, we will argue that the effort to define form as something over and above the explanation through which it comes into view and whose ends it serves has led to some confusion. The second is that such a generous view of form may only be secured by a more careful and constrained understanding of what form is for any particular discipline or, more specifically, of what kinds of explanation it can provide for that discipline or others. To borrow Zenon Pylyshyn's description of cognitive psychology, literary criticism "is fundamentally tied to a certain class of terms which in part define the phenomena it seeks to explain," and these terms also "in part dictate the sorts of accounts that qualify as putative explanations." As "a consequence of explanation is that it frequently redefines its explananda," this relationship between modes and objects of inquiry is flexible, but it is not open-ended.³ Seen this way, the

3. Zenon W. Pylyshyn, *Computation and Cognition: Toward a Foundation for Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 2.

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history of literary study would be, among other things, the ongoing story of what counts as formal explanation and the ongoing elaboration of terms particular to the discipline and its subject matter. That history includes the frequent and indelible use of what critics have variously identified as form, in a manner that is usually inseparable from the explanatory work of reading or argument or interpretation. Form is just particularly rich with respect to its yield because it is caught up in and founds so much of the competence required by the discipline itself.

The point itself should not be particularly controversial or surprising, but its implication for the place of the literary humanities in the contemporary division of knowledge may well be. To use form to explain something—anything—requires a working vocabulary proper to the literary before form can be welcomed into analogy with other things. The requirement would be, and is understood to be, the same within any scientific domain. A truly interdisciplinary practice will accept that notions of form vary meaningfully across disciplines, that the differences among them are sometimes irreducible, and that no single discipline or field-specific concept need obtain absolute explanatory priority over others. Since interdisciplinarity need not be our endgame, we would add that bringing the protocol of inquiry relativity to bear on literary interpretation has the potential to clarify criticism's authority and its rationale and to help it avoid unnecessary polemicism. In either case, our point will be to establish the simple premise that form and explanation work together, and to do so in the service of literary disciplinarity without apology or compromise.

1. Some Versions of Form

The millennial reboot of formalism has several variants, each dissatisfied with the explanatory norms of literary criticism. One cluster of arguments has been concerned with a subgroup of those norms called critique and with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick first diagnosed as its paranoid structure.⁴ In the now familiar terms of Bruno Latour, “we in the academy” explain social facts by appealing to “elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while [conspiracy theorists] like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents,” but there is “something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the

4. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C., 2003), pp. 123–51.

wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below.”⁵ Such “explanations [have] outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort”⁶ of critical endeavor, the sort that, according to one unfavorable assessment, believes it alone is “sufficient to effect change.”⁷ Though “heroic” in its aspirations, critique (on this view) not only mimes the authoritarianism it claims to oppose, it also fails to account for the singularity of aesthetic experience, which has cognitive and emotional effects that paranoid conspiracist reasoning, for all its sweep, neither explains nor explains away (“SR,” p. 5).

The quarrel with critique attracts revisionists, who want the study of literature and culture to be done very differently than it has been for the last several decades. In place of critique, the revisionist endorses novel approaches to literary artifacts by swapping “causal explanations” for what they sometimes consider to be formal ones. Yet in the modes of revisionism that have had the most traction, *form* is primarily a relational trope whose significance lies in the bearing or notice it solicits. In their much discussed essay on “surface reading,” for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus applaud a gentle, even naïve scrutiny of both the “intricate verbal structure of literary language” and “patterns that exist within and across texts,” even as they dispense with “the notion that freedom lies in aesthetic objects and aesthetic play” (“SR,” pp. 10, 11, 13). Here, form is identified with surface and surface with things like “structure” or “pattern,” a chain of association enabled by borrowing Fredric Jameson’s own notion of form as a “surface category” that eclipses the content of history. It is resolutely disidentified with “the artwork’s disinterested purposelessness,” for the value of surface lies neither in the history it conceals nor the politics it might stimulate but in the variously affective, ethical, or erotic relationship it enables between a text and its reader (“SR,” p. 14).

In this respect, revisionist formalism is essentially dispositional. Its byword is *attention*: the practice of attending to a text or artwork or else the quality of attentiveness in a critic (see “SR,” p. 16).⁸ For Best and Marcus, the object of such “immersive” attention is (of course) surface defined, in a canny burlesque of Jameson’s model of surface and depth, as “what

5. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 229. For a book-length treatment, see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2016).

6. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” p. 230.

7. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations*, no. 108 (Autumn 2009): 2; hereafter abbreviated “SR.”

8. One could say that the appeal of the original essay on surface reading is due, at least in part, to the sensual appeal of “the slow pace, receptiveness and fixed attention” it imagines accompanying “the refus[al] to celebrate or condemn [our] objects of study” (“SR,” p. 18).

is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden, nor hiding" ("SR," p. 9). A formalism of surface therefore understands that form is not something to be interpreted but something to "describe . . . accurately" ("SR," p. 16). This shift from extravagant flights of critical fancy to a more sedate norm of accuracy means to signal an end to both the paranoia and the epistemological relativism marring the kind of critique that, in Latour's memorable phrase, has run out of steam. Form is merely one thing that might fix the attention of a critic and that ought to be accounted for correctly. But if this relatively new appreciation for the empirical—for what is not only modest but also verifiable—shares in the wider postcritical reconciliation with the natural and social sciences, it also provides a hedge against any worry that, on its own, attention might supply merely a record of one's impressions. The partner term to attention for that reason is *description*, an activity meant to express in objective, written form the otherwise subjective and idiosyncratic experience of reading. The "practices of close attention . . . rely on description," Heather Love writes, because they must have some way of organizing and transmitting the material to which they attend to interested others, via a method that is, as she says, "close but not deep."⁹ To describe something is to surrender "the ethical charisma of the critic" and to take on in its place "the minimalist and painstaking" writing down of what one observes in a way that performs a yet more ethical fidelity to the object of observation.¹⁰

As an expression of the revisionary impulse, the turning of form to a matter of attention brings to mind Francis Bacon's definition of a formalist as someone "who explains a matter from its superficial rather than its substantial qualities," locating the ontology of a thing not in the narrative or fact of its existence but in the way it seems to some perceiving agent.¹¹ What we'll call reductionist formalism, by contrast, is committed to making form substantial, to furnishing it with an explicit definition that can also be used to explain aspects of the world, in the same way that a definition of gravity can be used to explain why things fall down. In other words, while the revisionist wants to change the methods of literary criticism, the reductionist wants to borrow its concepts so they take on supra-disciplinary meaning. Although earlier versions of twenty-first-century formalism tend to embrace an ecumenical view of their object—an essay by Susan Wolfson, for example, baptizes form as style, language, text, shape, structure, reading,

9. Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41 (Winter 2010): 375.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 387.

11. Francis Bacon, "Of Seeming Wise," *Essays* (London, 1985), p. 136.

rhyme, force, critique, repetition, formation, transformation, information, performance, formality, conformity, uniformity, and (from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*) "the seat or bed of a hare"—reductionist or, if you like, fundamentalist formalism yokes form to a distinct referent that serves as the predicate to a complex narrative of causation.¹² In practice this approach usually begins with the reductionist asking, What *is* form anyway? before proceeding under the assumption that a single answer can and should serve a range of examples. Thus, under reductionism, form can be anything from a *primum movens* to a force responsible for the existence of "the many different shapes and patterns that constitute political, cultural, and social experience."¹³

Our use of *reductionism* and *reductionist* is free of the pejorative edge those words have in everyday speech. For us, reductionism describes the particular goal of a certain kind of explanation. "An object (or concept) is said to be *reducible* to one or more other objects," writes Rudolf Carnap, "if all statements about it can be transformed into statements about these other objects."¹⁴ In the more expansive yet still clear-cut terms of *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, reduction "expresses the idea that if an entity *x* reduces to an entity *y* then *y* is in a sense prior to *x*, is more basic than *x*, is such that *x* fully depends upon it or is constituted by it." Thus "if one asserts that the mental reduces to the physical, that heat reduces to kinetic molecular energy, or that one theory reduces to another theory," one implies that "the reduced theory can be brought back to the reducing theory, the mental can be brought back to the physical, or heat can be brought back to molecular kinetic energy."¹⁵ An especially cogent example of reduction in this vein may be found in "A Little Formalism," Sandra Macpherson's contribution to the English Institute's 2013 meeting on the topic of form. Macpherson's essay sets out to sharpen our definition of form by fixing it as "nothing more—and nothing less—than the shape matter (whether a poem or a tree) takes." The claim is prompted by Macpherson's own frustration with the way those claiming "a genuinely formalist critical practice" remain "quite confused about form"—which is to say, unable to explain what precisely the word means or at least what

12. Susan J. Wolfson, introduction to *Reading for Form*, ed. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle, 2006), p. 4.

13. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, N.J., 2014), p. 17; hereafter abbreviated *F*.

14. Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*, trans. Rolf A. George (1928; Chicago, 2003), p. 6.

15. Raphael van Riel and Robert Van Gulick, "Scientific Reduction," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2015), plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/scientific-reduction

they mean by the word when they deploy it.¹⁶ Moreover, the promise of finding a referent for form that would stabilize its use across literary and extraliterary contexts holds out a provocative promise; going several steps further than Best and Marcus, Macpherson asks us to imagine a formalism that will “turn away from history without shame,” refusing to “hold form, and formalism, accountable to history” as either “ransom” or “redemption” (“LF,” pp. 385, 388). The trick is to show that form is distinct from the usual moorings assigned to it by literary critics—among them genre, social identity, political power, artworks, or (broadly) intended artifacts—and, more importantly, that it is prior to and more fundamental than any contingency. Macpherson’s form is at the bottom of things, at the base of an order of being from which everything else—poems, trees, people—scales up. It is also thinkable only *with* matter, the substance form shapes and that makes form apprehensible as, in a word, form.

This move to fundamentality is important. To say that form is fundamental is to say that it is the ground upon which individual examples and instances depend and to which they reduce.¹⁷ And to say *that* is to believe one ought to be able to analyze form without making reference to its various predicates: this genre, that historical example, and so on. Being a formalist therefore means attending to what is fundamental about whatever one wishes to explain, while also “turn[ing] away” from history in pursuit of a project that is strictly “ontological” (“LF,” p. 389). With the emphasis on ontology Macpherson echoes nothing so much as the New Criticism, which also characterized its task as an ontological one but with a conspicuous difference.¹⁸ The New Critics were after an ontology of the literary *text*; they asked questions like, what is a poem, what is the mode of its existence, what are its properties? Macpherson asks these questions, too, but she subsumes them into an ontology of form: for her, the question is, What is form such that we may say a poem is one instance of it and a rock another? The answer turns out to lie in a version of Aristotelian hylo-morphism: form inheres in matter, as matter’s shape (see “LF,” p. 388).¹⁹ Much follows from this positing of a unity between form and matter at the base of the natural order. Once it has secured a definition of form

16. Sandra Macpherson, “A Little Formalism,” *English Literary History* 82 (Winter 2015): 385; hereafter abbreviated “LF.”

17. See Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in *MetaMetaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford, 2009), pp. 347–83.

18. See for example John Crowe Ransom, “Wanted: An Ontological Critic,” in *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, Conn., 1941), pp. 279–336.

19. For materialism, see “LF,” pp. 397–98.

as “the shape a kind of matter takes,” Macpherson’s ontology levels out at the bottom, with such matter as “marble, paint, bridges, letters, cells, wood” having such shapes as sculpture, painting, poems, and trees (“LF” p. 389). Understood as shape, form then explains the existence of mid-size composites whose examples might include the Farnese Hercules, Lake Michigan, “In a Station of the Metro,” the Triborough Bridge, or a hepatocyte. This inclusion of form among the basic furniture of the universe means not only that its analysis does not have to be “accountable to history” but also that its examples don’t have to be aesthetic or intended.²⁰ The idea is to make form as inclusive and general as possible, so there is finally no difference in kind between manufactured forms like haikus or color field paintings and natural objects like glaciers and crystals, and so there is no need for an agent to create or behold any form for the word to have meaning. For Macpherson, this inclusiveness performs a consolation of sorts: when the human race goes extinct, and poems are no longer written or read, “other forms of matter will remain” (“LF” p. 402).

Macpherson sets form as the limit of a landscape that is evacuated of human agents and the artifacts they produce but still teeming with shapely substances. Caroline Levine also commits to the fundamentality of form, but her recent book *Forms* nonetheless finds form’s destiny not in the threat of extinction but in the promise of “radical politics”—by humans, for humans, figured and occasionally effected by human social activity, which is itself nothing but a perpetual iteration of form (*F*, p. 17). Macpherson would say that to attend to form is to get at the bottom of things, while to attend to history and to politics is not. For Levine, in contrast, a critic would be wrong “to keep her formalism and her historicism analytically separate” because, she argues, the conventional targets of both methods each have form (*F*, p. 1). There is a reason for this apparent difference. Like Macpherson, Levine says that form is fundamental, but whereas Macpherson’s ontology is scaled, Levine’s is flat, locating form equally and without priority in a very wide range of things, from more or less self-explanatory entities such as trees and poems to conceptual composites with names like politics and the political. No one of these things

20. Macpherson thus avoids the connection between formalism and any assertion of the autonomy of the work of art—the notion that intended art objects form a class of things distinct from rocks and bridges alike. Contrast the return to form in the recent work of Walter Benn Michaels, for whom “the simultaneous assertion of form and meaning” in a group of artists he finds compelling is an assertion of precisely the difference between aesthetic and other kinds of objects, “especially insofar as form might be thought to establish the work’s autonomy, or meaning might be understood as a function of the artist’s intentions” (Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* [Chicago, 2015], p. xi).

has any grounding relation to any other; rather, politics and the political are both necessary to and coextensive with anything in the world that has what Levine calls order and therefore also has what Levine calls form. As she puts it, “there is no politics without form,” for “it is the work of form to make order [and] this means that forms are the stuff of politics” because politics, too, is “order” and “organization,” at once nothing more and at the same time much more than “a matter of distributions and arrangements” (*F*, p. 3).

For Levine, “the stakes” of this triple-jointed characterization—according to which politics is formal because it makes order, form is political because it makes order, and order is both formal and political because it defines the operations of both form and politics—“are high” (*F*, p. 3). They are high because they offer a rapprochement between formalist and historicist methods, which would apply not only to literary or aesthetic objects but to any object subject to a principle of arrangement or ordering. After all, if mostly everything *has* form without being *grounded* by form, the analysis of form is inseparable from the analysis of mostly anything else. Thus “ballot boxes, biological clocks, and lyrical poems,” which “all take organizing forms,” universally accommodate, even command formal analysis (*F*, p. 11). One can be a formalist and study narrative or metrical patterns, but one can also be a formalist and study the matter of history, say, the “rhythms of labor, economic, racial, and sexual hierarchies, and sprawling, connective networks of capital” (*F*, p. xiii). The political import of such objects is conjoined to their existence as organizing forms, so even if we wanted to we could not concentrate on their politics or on their form but are instead compelled by the power of their mutual constitution to think always about both at once.

Despite their apparent differences, it takes only a minor adjustment to get from Macpherson’s scaled ontology of mid-sized material objects to Levine’s flat ontology of ubiquitous form. The move from asking what is it about lineation that shapes a poem or glaciation that shapes a gorge to what is it about clock time that shapes a work week or census taking that shapes a social body is a move from conceiving of form as shaped matter to conceiving of form as anything that exists. Levine’s version of reduction, then, consists in observing how anything that exists has an arrangement of elements, and this (finally) is where the historicism meets the formalism: to ask whether a social relation or a literary artifact exists or has existed is, in fact, to pose a historical question. As soon as Levine has answered yes to such a question she has, by her lights, recognized the presence of a form simply by saying that there is or was, at some time, a social relation or a literary artifact. She has done so because the existence

of something like a nation entails the further existence of something like “the bounded shape of a nation,” and so a historical inquiry into the first is also a formal analysis of the second (*F*, p. 122).

And yet, if the difference between scaled and flat ontologies is subtle, the difference in their respective temperaments is significant and pronounced. Macpherson has the pleasure of tweaking the discipline’s sensibilities (and its self-regard) by arguing that new formalism “isn’t reactionary enough” because it doesn’t stick to the material forms that are prior to “ethics and politics” (“LF” p. 397). Levine has the pleasure of hewing to just these sensibilities when she insists that formal and political analyses are identical. As being a formalist and promoting social change appear, for Levine, to be the same thing, one need only add a personal approval or disapproval to the recognition of a form in order to arrive at a political conclusion. “Any redistribution of the world’s wealth, which I strongly favor, must follow some kind of organizing principle” (*F*, p.18), she writes in one moment; and, in another, “I strongly endorse the critical tradition that warns against the power of unities to imprison and expel. It is true that bounded containers have been among the most disturbing of all political forms, organizing the violence of fascism, apartheid, and the abjection of the queer, as well as the serious environmental and ethical consequences of limiting our understanding of political community to human subjects” (*F*, pp. 26–27). The interlarding of such personal opinions as “I strongly favor” and “I strongly endorse” to the act of recognizing such forms as “organizing principle[s]” and “bounded containers” seems, at first blush, strange, but it follows from the premise that merely to exist is to have the kind of form subject to formalism. Sometimes forms lead to the redistribution of the world’s wealth. Sometimes they organize atrocity and oppression. One approves of the first, and one doesn’t approve of the second, and it is the act of the approving or disapproving that recognizes the existence of not only a form but also the politics it represents and the politics it demands.

It is the definition of form as “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” and politics as “imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies of experience” that allows the critic to recognize both at work in a poem or a police officer, as the case may be (*F*, p. 3). Revisionist formalism tends less towards this primary act of defining in favor (again) of setting the disposition of the critic as someone who doesn’t so much account for a form as describe what she reads. This act of description makes no claim to stand apart from attention in order to define what is being attended to, at a close range without going in too deep. In contrast, the exemplary versions of reduction we summarize here want to supply an answer to a question

about form that description doesn't bother to ask: what is it? In both cases, however, form stands in a fixed explanatory relation to the world. When they claim that form is responsible for things that exist—either by being fundamental or identical to them—or when they borrow form's name for an opposition movement within literary criticism, reductionist and revisionist discourses of form require the notion of form itself to remain consistent. Such a demand for consistency makes it impossible for these versions of formalism to coexist or rather for more than one of them to be right. If form is as labile as Wolfson suggests, it cannot always lie at the bottom of things as Macpherson says it must; if form announces a retreat from politics into description, as Best, Marcus, and Love would seem to hope, the announcement is absurd if we believe, with *Forms*, that form is always political. This state of affairs is curious insofar as it might lead us to discredit compelling work in the field, and it is unnecessary insofar as varieties of form turn out to thrive in the history of critical explanation. Our next section addresses these concerns.

2. Some Versions of Explanation

Is there such a thing as form so that a tree is one instance of it, a poem another, and an election cycle yet another? In an influential essay from 2007, Marjorie Levinson observes that for all the recent revisiting of form, there were as yet “no efforts to retheorize” the category itself, nothing that “puts redefinition front and center.”²¹ It is sensible to imagine that most everyone in literary studies might avow some commitment to something called form, but “what,” she asked, “is a shared commitment minus articulated agreement about the object to which one commits?” (“WNE,” p. 562). For Levinson, the absence of such an agreement is a problem because it ducks “the divisiveness encouraged by the kinds of cognitive, ethical, and juridical comments—as it were, content commitments” that mark what she characterizes as the historicist method (“WNE,” p. 562). On this view, one might be divisive about, say, whether inwardness began in the Renaissance or whether the logic of naturalism sprung from worries about the gold standard, while still being on the same page about what subjectivity or a novel is and sharing the conviction that each is important. In fact, Levinson argues, spirited debates among critics about such matters can only take off against the backdrop of this often-tacit consensus. Form, meanwhile, cannot be a proper object of commitment unless it signifies a content-bearing referent coextensive with something in the world, as the

21. Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?” *PMLA* 122 (Winter 2007): 561; hereafter abbreviated “WNE.”

ethical commitment of vegetarianism entails not eating animals. If form points to nothing in the world, we will be forced, on Levinson's account, to suspect that formalism is merely performative of "the aesthetic," an undirected show of engagement that needs only the myth of an object, and maybe not even that, toward which to steer itself ("WNF," p. 562).

Levinson's question—"what is a shared commitment" to form "minus articulated agreement" about what form is—is an important one. We mean to answer it by suggesting that it should remain open for as long as possible. Contradictory accounts of form by self-described formalists do not undermine form's conceptual credibility. They clarify something about literary studies, namely, that its methodological character depends on its tolerance for and facility with concepts whose meaning is keyed to their use in a specific context. Such concepts might be called partially demonstrative or else ostensive, insofar as their meaning cannot be associated with a single description.²² Here we follow Elizabeth Anscombe, who asks, "how does someone show that he has the concept cause?" only to answer, with arresting simplicity, "by having such a word in his vocabulary."²³ In that case,

the manifest possession of the concept presupposes the mastery of much else in language. I mean: the word "cause" can be *added* to a language in which are already represented causal concepts. A small selection: *scrape, push, wet, carry, eat, burn, knock over, keep off, squash, make* (e.g. noises, paper boats), *hurt*. But if we care to imagine languages in which no special causal concepts are represented, then no description of the use of a word in such languages will be able to present it as meaning cause.²⁴

We might thus say that a literary critic who uses the word *form* is already in possession of formal concepts and therefore of a working concept of form itself. That form appears sometimes as shape, sometimes as pattern, sometimes as habit, line structure, model, design, trope, and so on suggests not that formalism is incoherent but that form, like cause—perhaps like any useful and compelling term—is not a word without content but a notion bound pragmatically to its instances.

Our point is not that *shape, pattern*, or the rest should be taken as synonyms for form, any more than *carry* should be taken as a synonym for

22. See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 96.

23. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Causality and Determination: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 9.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

cause, vertical as a synonym for orientation, or wide as a synonym for space. It is that they should be taken as versions of form, as they have been—with very little handwringing—throughout the history of the discipline up to the present day. When, in his 1951 “Credo,” Cleanth Brooks listed as a fifth “article of faith” that “Form is Meaning,” he meant to limit the interpretation of texts to what was intrinsic to them—that is, their structure and their parts—as opposed to antecedent events in history or the life of the author and subsequent effects in the minds of readers. Form, in that case, meant “unity,” the “kind of whole which a literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts in building up this whole.”²⁵ In less programmatic fashion, John Hollander chose *Two Senses of Poetic Form* as the subtitle for *Vision and Resonance* because he was interested in how poets used intonation and inscription to evoke sounds and pictures.²⁶ To take some more recent cases, Hortense Spillers’s essay on Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha* describes the title character as “thriv[ing] because she wills it through diverse acts of form,” cast here as a doubling-up of characterological and authorial acts of organizing narrative space.²⁷ In D. A. Miller’s *Jane Austen or, The Secret of Style* the eminently formal device of free indirect style becomes also the “paradoxical form of an impersonal intimacy,” at once a *kind* of a perspective and the *way* that perspective is instantiated within the text.²⁸ Mark B. N. Hansen asks why digital media, which all comes down to “numerical coordinates,” still begs to be described as or with reference to “visually perceivable form.”²⁹ Monique Allwaert finds “Full fathom five thy father lies” challenging “the flatly numeric measure” of “the money form” by positing something “physical, rhythmic, and fundamentally relational” in its place.³⁰ Eleanor Johnson’s study of the medieval *prosimetrum* identifies its target as “mixed form” and form itself as both “the overall structure of a work” and “local elements of style,”³¹ while Michael Cohen’s *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* describes “the circulation of minstrel songs”

25. Cleanth Brooks, “The Formalist Critics,” *Kenyon Review* 13 (Winter 1951): 72.

26. See John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (Oxford, 1975).

27. Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature* (Chicago, 2003), p. 139.

28. D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton, N. J., 2003), p. 60.

29. Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), pp. 8–9.

30. Quoted in Monique Allwaert, *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis, 2013), p. 2.

31. Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago, 2013), p. 12.

during the antebellum and Civil War periods as part of a cultural “effort to idealize an abstract form of racial authenticity.”³²

This brief history of disciplinary use would appear to boost Angela Leighton’s claim that, while form “seems self-sufficient and self-defining,” it is rather “restless, tendentious, a noun lying in wait of its object.”³³ And yet it would also boost the claim that different critical texts may use form in sometimes dramatically different ways without producing a crisis in meaning or comprehension; surely we wouldn’t want to say that Brooks has no account of form but Hollander a perfect one, or that if we learn something valuable from Johnson on *prosimetrum* or Cohen on race we learn nothing from Allwaert on money or Hansen on zeroes and ones. Lest this proposal about form and its vagaries be taken to make a virtue out of mere ambiguity, we can compare it to claims made about disputed terms in other disciplines. Take, for example, recent work in the science of consciousness. Consciousness, like form, might seem self-sufficient and self-defining, but it too evades decisive characterization. This is because “the concept of consciousness,” as Ned Block puts it, “is a hybrid or better, a mongrel concept,” and “the word ‘consciousness’ connotes a number of different concepts and denotes a number of different phenomena,” ranging from the reported states of belief or desire to the felt character of lived experience.³⁴ Or consider the status of species in the overlapping disciplines of evolutionary biology, paleontology, and ecology, where the term might refer to a set of creatures able to create fertile offspring *or* that share morphological characteristics not found among others *or* that occupy a discrete location on an evolutionary tree. Or finally where the term might not refer to anything in nature at all.³⁵ In either case, the meaning of the term varies according to the research program it enters into and the part of the world to which it is directed; consciousness means experience for the scientist interested in how the brain gives rise to subjective feeling, but

32. Michael Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia, 2015), p. 202.

33. Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford, 2007), p. 1.

34. Ned Block, “On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness,” in *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates*, ed. Block, Owen Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p. 375; hereafter abbreviated “CFC.”

35. See Kevin De Queiroz, “Species Concepts and Species Delimitation,” *Systematic Biology* 56 (Dec. 2007): 879–86, and Sarah Wenning, “How Species Are Like Pornography: Species Concepts and the Fossil Record,” blogs.plos.org/paleo/2013/04/01/how-species-are-like-pornography/. On species as a nonreferring term, see Brent D. Mishler, “Species Are Not Uniquely Real Biological Entities,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Biology*, ed. Francesco Ayala and Robert Arp (New York, 2010), pp. 110–22. We would like to thank Stephanie Ranks for discussion on this point.

not to one working on theory of mind; species means unique reproductive capacity for those working on live specimens but not to those looking at fossils. This sort of variance is precisely what Carl Hempel described in his classic work on the language of science when he claimed that technical terms “have a distinct meaning and function only in the context of a corresponding theory” and therefore that the “operational criteria of application available for a term often amount to less than a full definition.”³⁶ We apply consciousness to one cluster of questions and species to another, and we are only misled when we collapse instances of consciousness into consciousness writ large or mistake one use of species for another. “There are reasons to doubt the possibility of providing *full* operational definitions for all theoretical terms in science,” as Hempel puts it, but this only means that we should be careful to discriminate the meaning of terms as they appear in an explanatory setting or situation.³⁷

We might answer Levinson’s critique of formalism therefore by arguing that formalism need not, indeed cannot provide a single definition of form because form is an entity known by occasion, through encounters with its subsidiary phenomena. This is evidence neither of defects in formalism nor in literary studies. On the contrary, as Block notes, the “many parallels in the history of science” suggest that varied use, suited to questions or methods or objects, is how disciplines usually work and rarely in such a way as to compromise integrity or prestige (“CFC,” p. 375). Aristotle used *velocity* to mean average velocity as well as instantaneous velocity, while “the Florentine experimenters of the seventeenth century used a single word . . . for temperature and for heat”; yet we do not believe that Aristotle said nothing about velocity or that the members of the Academy of Florence said nothing about temperature or heat (“CFC,” p. 375). Such undifferentiated concepts flourish in the sciences insofar as they understand themselves as *contexts*—as epistemic domains operating under a set of local and shifting, but still reliable, constraints. Applications of the term *form* are therefore unsatisfactory only when they make arguments “using some premises that apply to some phenomena falling under [form’s] category and other premises that apply to other phenomena” also falling under form’s category but with a different meaning (“CFC,” p. 375). In such cases, form is being mixed up with *forms* in the same way that Block finds consciousness too often mixed up with *consciousnesses* or that John

36. Carl Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (New York, 1965), pp. 140, 143.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Dupré and Philip Kitcher have found the term *species* used to reflect one way of sorting organisms into sets when it covers multiple “approaches to the demarcation of species taxa.”³⁸

Again, that such confusion happens does not mean there is no such thing as form or species or consciousness; it means that these terms become intelligible in particular and independently interesting contexts. If, as Bacon says, a formalist is someone who “explains a matter” in a certain way, then perhaps we should distinguish form as a “matter” or topic from form as a kind of explanation, thus sifting and separating out context-specific instances of a thing from an ambiguous representation of the thing itself as a unitary entity. When it comes to this version of form—the form that belongs to the formalist—we might even suggest that there is no form without formalism, no object without the method that names it. To put it slightly differently, we might say that the varieties of form arise only in the shifting context of formalism, only in the practice of critical explanation.

“There is an old opinion,” writes I. A. Richards, that with respect to works of art “explanation is itself derogatory,” as if to come up with an account of these works were to diminish our experience of them.³⁹ Now that the moment of high standing for literary texts has turned to the low standing of their disciplines of study, however, the reluctance to consider the workaday interpretive habits of humanist scholars as explanations in their own right is due for some reconsideration. Consider how arguably the most successful recourse to explanation in literary study has endeavored to redefine criticism away from its ordinary, interpretive practice. The penultimate paragraph of Franco Moretti’s landmark *Graphs, Maps, Trees* makes this careful distinction: “the models I have presented . . . share a clear preference for explanation over interpretation; or perhaps, better, for the explanation of general structures over the interpretation of individual texts.”⁴⁰ In what did these explanations consist? The achievement of *Graphs, Maps, Trees* was to produce such a thing as an account of how the detective novel evolved in a way that was like but also importantly different from an actual biological organism subject to natural selection. It was like a biological organism because parts of the form changed as it competed for the scarce attention of readers; it was unlike such an or-

38. Philip Kitcher, “Species,” *Philosophy of Science* 51 (June 1984): 309. See also John Dupré, “Natural Kinds and Biological Taxa,” *Philosophical Review* 90 (Jan. 1981): 66–90.

39. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London, 2004), p. 157.

40. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London, 2005), p. 91.

ganism because the path of its evolution could converge with different species as well as branch out on its own.⁴¹ This kind of analysis explained the development of a form (the detective novel) in a way that understood its phenomenon (the explanandum) to be the entire “tree” of its development and not the individual novels that filled out its branches.

The act of following a form along locations on a map or branches of a tree can only view form as something larger than any one instance of it. And so it can only view the procedure of explanation as an abstraction away from and a revision of the ordinary practice of critical reading—or, one might say, an abstraction away from and revision of the *ordinary science* of literary study.⁴² On Moretti’s own account, that is, this explanatory relation holds only for “general structures” and not for the “individual texts” whose analyses turn out to be mere “interpretation,” a word that evidently suffers in the comparison to the “explanation” of the whole. Moretti’s point is mistaken to the degree to which he fails to see interpretation—considered in the broad sense as everything that literary scholars do—as itself a variety of explanation. It is mistaken in other words when it cedes the ground of explanation entirely to the procedures, methods, and assumptions of another discipline (to computer science, for example) and refuses to grant that critics are doing explanation whenever they set out to work. Roman Jakobson wrote that “the object of literary science is not literature but literariness,” a quality that will always be to some degree subjective and intuitive, in excess of any impartial metric.⁴³ By this he meant that literature occupied a particular place in the world and thus required a mode of explanation suited to its peculiarities. We would add to this point that some scientific debates might clarify what these peculiarities are along with the disciplinary rationale for their study. And behind *this* claim lies another, stronger one, namely, that literature stands in the same

41. See *ibid.*, pp. 80–81. The familiar criticism that Moretti’s analysis stakes an untenable homology between literary and biological evolution is therefore quite mistaken.

42. This is so even without the disciplinary argument against close reading that took on special salience when method joined up with developments in the digital humanities. In fact, the explanatory procedure of taking a form and following it from space to space while studying its transformations relies on punctuated instances of (often virtuoso) close reading. In the case of the tree made by the development of free indirect style, the procedure needs to get right up next to modulations of voice in passages from Jane Austen, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Émile Zola, and James Joyce before it puts them in evolutionary and cartographic relation to each other; see *ibid.*, pp. 81–92. The argument therefore isn’t against reading such passages closely; the argument is that reading them closely doesn’t produce an explanation until it is abstracted into the tree composed by their pathways across nations and historical time.

43. Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art,” in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 38.

relation to literary method as we have described form standing in relation to formalism, experiential consciousness in relation to neuroscience, or species in relation to biology: we know it not when we see it but when we know how we see it. Being a scientist about literature in this sense does not mean applying science to literature. Nor does it mean changing a critical method so that it seems more like what biologists or economists do. Rather, it means thinking about “literariness” as the special quarry of criticism, and it also means being in possession of a language that upholds criticism as a singular and substantial mode of explanation.

Explanations—as Hempel, Ernst Nagel, and Bas van Fraassen have argued—are answers to questions, specifically why-questions. Thus the theory of gravity is a good explanation to give in answer to the question why do objects fall toward the earth? and the theory of evolution is a good explanation to give in answer to the question why do undesirable phenotypic traits gradually disappear or become rare in species that survive and reproduce? Note we have not said that *gravity* or *evolution* explain these phenomena but rather that a set of ideas concerning falling and the life of a species do the explaining. Because they are relevant only insofar as they respond to a question in a way that actually answers what is being asked, explanations are also essentially relative, changing in nature and value with respect to their capacity to provide the kind of information being sought. As van Fraassen puts it, “scientific explanation is not (pure) science but an application of science. It is a use of science to satisfy certain of our desires; and these desires are quite specific in a specific context, but they are always desires for descriptive information.”⁴⁴ This has certain implications for our understanding of literary criticism and literary formalism, the ostensible eclecticism of which we may now understand as its own kind of rigor: the application of a proprietary set of terms and practices to an important corner of the world.

This is the sort of rigor that Kitcher, in his expansion of the species concept, associates with a method he calls pluralistic realism. We prefer John Dupré’s “promiscuous realism,” which perhaps better captures the spirit of the disciplinary law of desire that underwrites it.⁴⁵ We desire information about the subject matter that concerns us, and we judge ourselves to be using the right language to describe that subject matter whenever it gives us access to the information we desire in such a way that is recognized by the consensus judgment of the discipline. In *The*

44. Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford, 1980), p. 156.

45. Dupré, *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), esp. pp. 37–59.

Secret of Style, Miller wants to know both why and how Austen's free indirect style—which Frances Ferguson calls “the novel's one and only formal contribution to literature”—projects a certain model of personhood, one that struggles to appear beyond gender and thus throws a wrench into the conventional assumption that Austen is her novels' narrator.⁴⁶ Like Ferguson, he is interested in free indirect style as a feature of the novel on par with the chapter, the dénouement, or the epigraph and thus part of its formal construction, but he is also interested in understanding the rapport among narrator, character, and reader as a social relation like any other, capable of intimacy, detachment, judgment, compassion, and so on. This relation is also a form; in this case, it holds two or more centers of consciousness, represented or real, in a play of closeness and distance, understanding and opacity. That anyone who has read enough Austen, and read her carefully, is capable of recognizing and even reproducing free indirect style suggests that the form holds its shape across contexts, a capacity that in turn supports its designation as form. In other words, what we find in *The Secret of Style* is a formalism that speaks to other formalisms engaged in thinking through similar problems—problems such as the partial confluence of literary and social representation—as well as an independently vital development of formalism as a method. If there is a rule of thumb to be derived here and from our brief survey of formally engaged scholarship above it is that questions drive the work that we do, and explanatory terms follow in their train. Promiscuity is the mark of a discipline in good enough shape to adapt its distinctive idiom to changing and specific contexts.

3. Against Polemic

We consider the diversity of approaches to form over the long haul of the discipline to express the discipline's good standing, not its crisis. The collection and taxonomy of terms that fall under the analysis of form vary according to the research program and accompanying desires of the critics who use them; this is what it means for literary study to be a discipline of knowledge located in an academic department. We therefore have no interest in pitting one version of form against another, or in establishing our own (we are formalists and, yet, we don't have one) in the place of everyone else's. Our exploration of form leads us to conclude that the inconsistency with which the term is used gives criticism a solid justification for remaining the way it is—minus the polemics that state criticism should

46. Frances Ferguson, “Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form,” in *Reading for Form*, p. 233.

cease to be one thing in order to be something else. In other words, the record inspires confidence, insofar as it has tacitly allowed a methodological and discursive pluralism to count as a testament to rigor, much as it does for other fields and forms of knowledge.

Our argument has been that the work of literary study ought to be credited as a type of explanation. It entails that ideas of form should vary according to the kind of questions critics ask of fields that both precede and respond to their efforts, just as it entails that scholars and students of literature be credited with an expertise measured by the consensus judgment of the discipline. To recognize that literary studies is a discipline like others is to own that it is, in the cant of the bureaucrats and managers, a silo of specialized intelligence. Work in one proprietary language or idiom is inevitably not work in another; we evaluate research by asking whether or not it has provided satisfactory explanations for the questions it has set out to ask, while remaining fully aware that to ask some questions is not to ask others. No account of any phenomenon can explain that phenomenon completely or to the exhaustion or preclusion of any other mode of explanation. Explanations are bound to questions, questions are bound to disciplines, and disciplines are bound to the rules they make for themselves—nothing more.