

Critical Response

V

Forms and Explanations: A Reply to Our Critics

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In “Form and Explanation” (*Critical Inquiry* 43 [Spring 2017]: 650–69) we argued that the meaning of the term *form* ought to vary according to the explanatory situation of the critic who uses it. We further argued that such variance holds for many technical terms used in the sciences. Behind these claims was a desire to show how literary studies, despite its reputation for exemplary permissiveness, is a discipline like any other; it produces knowledge about the world through methods and protocols that are open-ended but subject to evaluation by its practitioners. Our goal was to defend what we do and how we all do it. In that respect, we are proud formalists. We are formalists, too, when we say we believe that literary critics do their explanatory work by means of form, whether they mean to or not. Even so, nothing in “Form and Explanation” suggests that self-styled formalist criticism is the only kind of criticism that counts. We understand the commitment to form as explanation to describe a baseline of competence from which an infinite variety of scholarship might follow. In that respect, we are also pluralists. The human sciences admit of variation and incongruity and so, happily, does work within our particular field.

The responses to our essay raise important questions about this sort of pluralism: How many versions of form are admissible before a discipline loses coherence? How to understand work between or across disciplines in formal terms, or to see the formalist expertise we associate with literary studies in the context of interdisciplinary projects? Why should we, as lit-

erary critics, value *competence*, *knowledge*, and *expertise* in the first place? What picture of the world do such values entail? We're grateful for the chance to respond to these queries and to clarify our sense of what they involve; in other words, we plan both to address the specific concerns raised by our interlocutors and to say a few things about how their own assumptions, from the methodological to the metaphysical, do and do not jibe with ours. With that in mind, we will begin with the view of the world our account puts into play, before turning to the responses and the institutional and epistemological frameworks they imply.

Several of our respondents were made uneasy by our use of the word *pluralism* to describe our attitude toward the methods of literary study. This discomfort seems to follow from a concern that this kind of pluralism, as Marjorie Levinson puts it, risks a slide into "an antidefinitional, radically nominalist or particularist position" (p. 149). Before we address such an anxiety directly, we would like to revisit the definition of pluralism given by the philosopher of science John Dupré in his 1993 book, *The Metaphysics of Disorder*:

First, in opposition to an essentialist doctrine of natural kinds, pluralism [is] the claim that there are many equally legitimate ways of dividing the world into kinds, a doctrine [we may] refer to as 'promiscuous realism'; and second, in opposition to reductionism, pluralism [is] the insistence on the equal reality and causal efficacy of objects both large and small. . . . Only a privileged and restricted set of entities and kinds could make it plausible that everything could occur in accordance with a unified and universally applicable set of principles.¹

As Dupré makes clear, pluralism in this sense is neither a moral commitment, nor a politics, nor even a methodology. Rather, it is simply a way of characterizing the relation between different ways of seeing the world. In "Form and Explanation," we refer to these ways of seeing as "disciplines" and "methods." The everyday procedures of chemists and anthropologists and literary scholars are different, on our view, because the world itself is differentiated. While this is a metaphysical thesis, it underwrites

1. John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 7.

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the distinct practical cultures of the separate disciplines of thought. This way of picturing the world motivated our claim that form for literary studies doesn't have to be form, say, for biologists; it likewise helped us understand why so many versions of form proliferate within as well as outside the discipline. Finally, it motivated our wariness of claims that there is one way of doing formalism, or that some critics ought to stop what they are doing in order to do something else. A competitive or a self-hating framework is bad for any field, but, for reasons we explore at greater length here, it is particularly bad for the literary humanities. We believe that now is the time to commit to our field's intellectual rationale, whether in contexts of interdisciplinary collaboration or on its own merits. We also believe that this commitment supports the reasons given by our respondents for valuing what they do.

Tom Eyers opens by characterizing our view as "a liberal-ecumenicist vision" but seems, in the rest of his excellent essay, to grasp that our pluralism does not have a built-in politics (p. 137). We certainly agree that "any reflexive Leftist rejection of K and N's liberal ecumenicism would risk confusing an argument local to epistemological discussion in literary studies with the related but different domain of our current moment of political crisis" (p. 143). We agree not just because we decline both liberalism and ecumenicism as epithets for our account of form but also because our respective political orientations, affiliations, and commitments are not waiting to be greenlit by our ideas about the study of aesthetic objects; nor do we think our ideas about form's meanings within the discipline need to be preapproved by our politics. Our intention has been merely to produce some clarity around an issue (form) that seems to have crystallized a larger crisis of methodological conscience within the discipline.

Eyers appears to have a good idea of why form would lie at the heart of such matters when he associates the term, "first and foremost," with "difficulty" (p. 139). Across its various iterations, form is difficult in Eyers's view because it is caught up in making the world intelligible, as the object or occasion for research; in other words, form grounds specific investigations into an unlimited range of topics and questions. So Eyers contends, rightly, that "the literary humanities have been distinguished from the social sciences not only by their differing objects of analysis but by their different epistemologies," before listing some distinctive problems with which "a literary critic must reckon." These include "the unpredictable mutations of figural language, the slippages of translation, the unstable, internally split scenes of reception and reproduction that inhere both at the level of the line and across varied scales of literary reproduction and circulation," and so on (pp. 140, 141). If this inventory seems somewhat textual in its focus—literary in the narrow sense of having to do with words and books—perhaps that is because Eyers is keen to engage in quarrels with historicism and other

strands of thinking that, on his view, take on board too much from other disciplines and have too much to say about the extraliterary contents of the world. We have no horse in this race but would hasten to clarify that our “contextualism,” as Eyers puts it, is not as he seems to think a version of historicism (p. 141). By context we do not mean the historical context for cultural artifacts. We mean the contexts of *explanation*: the pursuits of research questions that call upon, even as they modify, the cumulative knowledge and practice of the field.

Eyers seems to share our belief that definitions of form follow from explanatory requirements and that these will necessarily vary according to the ambitions of the critic or project in play. At the same time, and at cross purposes, he also asks us to consider “aspects of literary form that do, in fact, result in a kind of self-sufficiency, a withdrawal from any straightforward assignation of a clearly-defined context of analysis” (p. 141). We admit to some confusion in Eyers’s argument on this point. He glosses this assertion by claiming that it is not just concepts of objects but objects themselves that are mutable in explanatory situations. We entertain a version of this idea favorably in the original essay. We don’t see how it follows, however, that aspects of form “withdraw” from analysis or possess “self-sufficiency.” We would venture that the opposite is the case; explanatory contexts work because they make form visible within an evolving set of practices and norms.

This set constrains as much as it proliferates the meaning of form, shaping what counts as evidence, is persuasive, or seems elegant. We concentrated on and indeed advocated for the proliferation of meanings because we wanted to show how terminological abundance is actually tied to such epistemic protocols. The sort of promiscuous realism on display in “Form and Explanation” is an intermediate position between a strongly realist view and a broadly constructivist one—between, that is, the belief that there are things in the world that have natures and identities untouched by what people think and say about them, and the belief that the world’s contents are amorphous and commutable, participating in reality only to the extent that they have been captured and made legible by some structure or grid. It is important to distinguish this idea of promiscuity from nominalism, which is how Eyers and Levinson characterize our view, and which would seem (in Eyers’s words) to allow anyone to “pick [a] definition of form depending on what [she or he] plan[s] to use for it” (p. 141).²

2. Levinson spreads her response to our idea of inquiry relativity over many enumerated points. Our reply to her and Eyers here applies to most of them (1–5), but several deserve individual if necessarily brief attention. In 6, Levinson is wrong to say that we “join together” Carl Hempel and Bas van Fraassen. Hempel appears only briefly with respect to our point that terms in science vary according to the questions and contexts of research. Levinson is right however that we work more with van Fraassen’s later account of what explanation en-

That was not our argument. The misunderstanding seems to arise from our claim that form is “a notion bound pragmatically to its instances” (p. 661). Nothing about this proposal implies nominalism, which sometimes means the belief that there are no universals and sometimes the belief that there are no abstract objects and sometimes both these beliefs together. We do not believe any of these things, certainly not when it comes to form. To be clear: the nominalist would hold that *there is no form*, that *form does not exist* outside instances of form; the constructivist would believe that *form exists* but also that *form is contingent*; the realist would believe that *form exists* and that *form does not change* no matter what we say about it; and finally, the promiscuous realist believes that *form exists*, that its existence legitimates the idea that there could be good and bad classifications of form as an entity or property, and that there is a decisive role for persons, institutions, and conventions in the practice of classification.

What we are calling classification could be taken as a subsidiary of explanation and a synonym for theory. An explanation, as we have defined it, is a goal-dependent analysis or treatment of some part or parts of the world, from sonnets to seismographs, settler colonialism to climate science. Theory, not a term significant to our essay, might on this same view be understood as a set of statements that bear logical and indeed explanatory relations to one another. When Fredric Jameson calls the disordered and opaque vernacular of modernist literature “a symbolic resolution or solution” to the “experience of *anomie*, standardization, desacralization in the *Umwelt* or world of daily life,” he is articulating a theory that defines the relation between cultural products and historical, economic circumstances as a complex but definite drama of cause and effect; he is also asking for a notion of form that would help explain how a novel can appear to solve problems whose own causes are outside of and antecedent to it.³ When we say that form is a notion pragmatically bound to its instances, we are defining form against a view of form as only ever meaning one thing, or as only ever having one kind of relationship to other things in the world. Our theory is one in which Jameson can be right about form but so can William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. Our theory is not one, however, in which Jameson can be right about Marxism and so can someone who confuses base and superstructure, nor is it one in which a Marxist politics

tails. In 9, Levinson misunderstands us to be saying that, since Franco Moretti’s recourse to explanation was “successful,” we are using it as a model (quoted on p. 152). Our understanding of “success” referred only to impact in the profession. We respectfully dispute his opposition of explanation to interpretation.

3. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), p. 42.

is interchangeable with any other. Such questions were and remain outside the purview of “Form and Explanation,” and nothing we have said about pluralism or promiscuous realism would necessarily be exportable to these distinct domains, whose own procedures for classification and evaluation are quite of another kind and dimension.

We raise the question of theory to address Eyers’s suspicion that our essay demotes it in order to prioritize method. We also raise it to address a remark made near the end of Levinson’s response, specifically in her points 13 and 14. Here, Levinson writes that, in reading our essay, she is “reminded of Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp’s essay from 1982, ‘Against Theory’” (p. 154). We confess to being perplexed. Knapp and Michaels may have taken “a move against the profession’s fixation on the problematic intentionality of language,” but we did not, since like theory itself, that problem simply falls outside the purview of our argument (pp. 154–55). More to the point, our interest in the procedures of explanation, and our epistemic commitment to the conventions of the discipline, diverge significantly from the final section of “Against Theory,” where Knapp and Michaels move from talk about language to talk about belief. In that section, Knapp and Michaels propose that whatever one believes in an explanatory context, one likewise believes to be true, even as “beliefs cannot be grounded in some deeper condition of knowledge.”⁴ On this basis, they conclude that it is impossible to “escape one’s beliefs or escape the sense that they are true.” When we learn something we didn’t know before, they claim, we just revise one belief with another, understanding ourselves to be right all of the time. It is unclear, however, whether Knapp and Michaels hold that one would be *right* to believe oneself right all the time. That is because they shorten the standard expression in epistemology from “knowledge is *justified* true belief” to “knowledge and true belief are the same.”⁵ In other words, they skip over the reasons one has for believing what one believes or, in the case of the kind of knowledge that academic disciplines are in the business of producing, over the elaborate set of evidentiary and argumentative protocols that justify a given belief as true. We find this account of knowledge to be thin in the extreme. If a commitment to the justificatory norms of a discipline makes one a theorist, then we are theorists through and through.⁶

4. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 738.

5. *Ibid.*

6. We might add, if the notion that one can never escape one’s beliefs makes one a pragmatist, then are we not pragmatists.

In other words, “Form and Explanation” hopes to make a case for flexibly judging the theoretical foundations that structure the various disciplines. To us, such an ambition is more or less benign; to Caroline Levine, however, it is dangerously “bloodless.” Our argument, she writes, “coolly evacuates . . . research of any urgency, any sense that some projects might matter more than others” (p. 130). Worse, in our attempt to consider how disciplines make arguments, we proceed in abstract as opposed to concretely moral terms. This is a red flag for the author of *Forms*, a book whose sense of form is intended “to join inquiry to activism” by annulling metaphysical, social, or scalar distinction among the world’s various contents. Here is Levine:

Many inquiries may be proper to the discipline, as Kramnick and Nersessian argue, but are all projects equally important? Is a research question about changes to the length of mid-Victorian frock-coats as valuable as a question about the persistence of racial inequality? If so, why exactly? And if not, then why bother to pursue the less important question? [P. 130]

These seem, perhaps, like good questions, so let’s consider their premises. Why does Levine use the language of *import*, why is *import* so urgent, and why is its urgency articulated in this precise manner, leaning on this specific set of examples? We would propose that demands for relevance at this moment in time, and in our discipline, ought not to be made lightly. Their milieu (not to say their cause) is the corporate university, with its jargon of impact factors, h-indices, and the like. Such metrics are unabashedly designed to produce data that makes departments easier to shrink, funding harder to come by, and workers more fireable, and yet their advocates also use the language of social worth and accountability. To quote the University of Leicester’s Office of Research Support Services: “More than £1.5 billion per year of tax-payers’ money goes to fund research in higher education institutions. Impact asks us the question: ‘What is the return on that investment, for the man in the street?’”⁷ In Levine’s response, this cynical tableau of bottom-line thinking and class antagonism is swapped out for something of a false dilemma over which is more “valuable”: a research project on “the length of mid-Victorian frock coats,” or a research project on “the persistence of racial inequality.” We suspect this contest is rigged. We’re also intrigued by how Levine presents each option—clothes, injustice—as unrelated to the other. Surely someone might have

7. “Impact—What It Is and Why It Matters,” University of Leicester, www2.le.ac.uk/offices/researchsupport/impact/impact-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters

something “valuable” to say about the relationship between, for example, the plantation economies of the nineteenth century and Victorian consumer culture.⁸ Levine’s response, however, sequesters “inequality” in “a world . . . outside of history,” where it floats free of both context and causation.⁹ Levine believes the job of literary scholars is “to explain the world as part of the struggle to change it,” but we are uncertain how either the explanation or the elimination of racial inequality is to proceed without some sense of what brings it into being and allows it to flourish (p. 133).¹⁰

To recap, the premise of *Forms* is that the concept of form should be enlarged to include any or all aspects of the world that have order or arrangement. In “Form and Explanation,” we were particularly interested in the way that the book identified every form with a political value of one or another kind, and we were especially interested in how expressing an opinion about these values seemed important for its argument. In her response, however, Levine significantly alters our account of her project, in a manner worth going over closely. In her last few paragraphs, she quotes our essay as follows:

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. Sometimes forms lead to the redistribution of the world’s wealth. Sometimes they organize atrocity and oppression.

8. Of course, and as Levine must be aware, a number of scholars have written movingly and persuasively on exactly this relationship. See, to take only a few examples, Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago, 2006); Julia Sun-Joo Lee, *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* (New York, 2012); Paul Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); and most recently Daniel Hack, *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature* (Princeton, N.J., 2016). We would also point Levine toward Anne Boyer’s extraordinary *Garments Against Women* (Boise, Idaho, 2015).

9. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York, 2014), p. 147. For the Fieldses, racial inequality happens within, not against or apart from, the contexts and causes that also shape such things as the length of frockcoats. Indeed, the point extends to a critique of the kind of leverage that might want to keep the two separate.

10. We might also add that Levine’s suggestion that pursuing the sort of politically efficacious projects she thinks critics should pursue involves being “beyond discipline” strikes us as odd. “A research question” about the persistence of racial inequality will look one way to a chemist working on the microstructure of toxins dumped in the vicinity of Camden, New Jersey; another way to an economist working on wealth and wage gaps; another way to a sociologist working on mass incarceration; another way to an interdisciplinary literary critic working on the aesthetics of race and environmental health in contemporary fiction (p. 176). Does disciplinary situatedness really undermine the integrity (moral, political, scholarly) of these projects?

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. [Quoted on pp. 132–33]

This is Levine's quotation of our essay exactly as she wrote it, with a period after "strange" in the first sentence. In our essay, however, the sentence does not stop there. In its entirety, our sentence reads: "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*" (p. 659; emphasis added). Thus, when Levine writes that "Kramnick and Nersessian find it 'strange' that my work would involve approving of some forms and disapproving of others," she is simply wrong (p. 132). We don't find it strange at all; we suggest that it might "seem" strange "at first blush," but we argue that it is licensed, indeed made inevitable by the maximally expansive characterization of form she has put in play. Because Levine, in *Forms*, has defined form as everything that exists, and because she has further defined every such existence as having a political value, the act of expressing an opinion about such a value becomes an act of recognizing the existence of a form.

We were interested in how this account handled the quiddity of any particular form, how form for Levine is primary but neither lies beneath nor derives from anything else. That is what we meant by describing her ontology as flat. For Levine, the act of recognizing the existence of a form expresses allegiances that are prior to and more fundamental than the commitment to a particular kind of analysis or a particular kind of object. So, in *Forms*, form may be said to be the same in a ballot box or a three-decker novel; so, in her response, Levine implies that when we decide on the "purposiveness and value" of one academic project over another we are choosing between things that are ontologically alike even if we judge them differently according to our personal ethics. In sum, Levine is committed at once to academic work and to "the flourishing of bodies, intimacies, pleasures, and creativity," but *both* commitments are separate from the procedures of explanation and knowledge that reside in a given academic formation (p. 132). We conclude with our surprise that a scholar whose work on form began, on her own account, with the discovery that "we humans could never do without formal constraints" ends up imagining that questions of purposiveness and value could be answered in a space that is "beyond discipline" (pp. 132, 134). Could decisions about what constitutes

“better and worse [academic] projects or methods” ever be made without recourse to the procedural norms and explanatory constraints of an academic discipline (p. 135)? We are not sure—not at all.

Levine wants to transcend the ordinary science of the discipline, but it is telling that her most concrete example of a literary critic affecting social change is her redistribution of the workload within her department. We like this example because, to borrow a phrase from Heather Love’s careful and convivial response, it “emphasize[s] the everyday realities of the profession” and turns them into food for methodological self-reflection (p. 160). As Love rightly notices, our argument in “Form and Explanation” is in the primary sense descriptive. We were and are less interested in telling colleagues what they ought or ought not to be doing than in recognizing what they already do as legitimate, coherent, valuable, and interesting. That said, Love puts helpful pressure on whether “literariness” can stand as the explananda for all this sort of work, as we may have suggested in our invocation of Roman Jakobson. “Is literariness so singular and unaccountable,” she asks, “that having it as our quarry means that we can never settle down to disciplinary business as usual?” This is a good question. To clarify, we used the term “literariness” in order to acknowledge the evolving variety of texts, artifacts, topics, and methods that fall within the everyday practice of literary studies. Unlike literature, *literariness*, as both substance and quality, declines to repose on canons or traditions and thus keeps the borders of the discipline open. We are therefore in broad agreement with the lesson Love derives from Paul de Man, that we ought to maintain “a willingness to sustain uncertainty and to pursue scholarship without a determinate object” (pp. 159, 161).

We do, however, hesitate over Love’s further conclusion that “what an encounter with literature teaches is not the voiding of reality but of our competence in relation to it” (p. 161). In the context of our argument, “competence” implicates the work of the critic who brings the various explananda of literary studies into meaningful relation with each other. All academic inquiries constitute and constellate their objects by having something important to say about them. If anything, de Man’s brief for what reading does is too limited and certainly too mean to accommodate the interdisciplinary work with which Love associates herself—namely, the kind of work capable of taking on “the opacity and ephemerality of social life” in explicitly literary but also social science texts. Her self-professed “restlessness” with respect to inhabiting a single disciplinary framework does not mean that form or explanation float free of the expertise grounded in such frameworks (p. 162). It just means that Love has combined several of these into something original and productive, into a beautiful example

of exactly the critical and methodological competence that belongs to the everyday life of the discipline.

The argument of "Form and Explanation" is entirely compatible with interdisciplinary work and even with the sentiment driving some "English professors climbing the rails" to "jump ship" (p. 156). Our point in "Form and Explanation" was just that disciplinarity is itself a kind of competence in which interdisciplinarity is of course capable of participating in its own way. When Love invokes the inadequacy of description, we cannot help but hear the suggestion that literary criticism, and not just literature, is inadequate to the task of understanding "the phenomenal world" (quoted on p. 161). What we have suggested is that inadequacy be better understood as partiality, as a tactical and necessary narrowness that captures some piece of the world because the world may be best understood in pieces because it is in pieces that the world exists. This view is neither tragic nor elegiac. It is what we have to work with, and we are partial to it.