

MODERN and CONTEMPORARY POETRY and POETICS

THE MEANING
OF FORM IN
CONTEMPORARY
INNOVATIVE
POETRY

Robert Sheppard



Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

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The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry

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PREFACE

I gratefully acknowledge funds from the Edge Hill University REF Development Fund which assisted in the writing of parts of this work, and for travel to conferences and talks. Early thinking on formal matters informed conference appearances and talks at the Universities of Amsterdam, London (Innovative Poetry Seminar), Edinburgh, Salford, Edge Hill, Northumbria, and for CONTEMPO (the Universities of Aberystwyth, Bangor, and Brighton). ‘The Innovative Sonnet Sequence’ was the title of the annual lecture at Hay Poetry Jamboree, 2011, a playful pre-version of Chap. 3. I thank the organizers of these events for encouragement and opportunities. Working notes often appeared on my blog-zine, *Pages* (robertsheppard.blogspot.com).

I am particularly pleased to be able to republish, with permission, two pieces which were published elsewhere in earlier forms: a version of Chap. 2, ‘Linguistically Wounded: The Poetical Scholarship of Veronica Forrest-Thomson’ in ed. Turley, Richard Margraf, *The Writer in the Academy: Creative Interfrictions, Essays and Studies 2011*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, for the English Association; and a version of Chap. 9, ‘Stefan Themerson and the Theatre of Semantic Poetry’ in eds. Blaim, Ludmiła Gruszeckiej, and David Malcolm, *Eseje o Współczesnej Poezji Brytyjskiej i Irlandzkiej*, Volume 5: Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Ludmi, 2011.

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Fig. 1 Sophie Robinson, 'Geometries' (Hilson 2008: 352)

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Introduction: Form, Forms, and Forming

Poetry is the investigation of complex contemporary realities through the means (meanings) of form.

This conjecture guides the theoretical accounts of form and the readings of (mainly British) contemporary poetry that follow. The pun upon ‘means’ is intended to enact the supposition that if poetry does anything, it does it chiefly through its formal power and less through its content, though it also carries the further suggestion that form is a modality of meaning in its own right. If we use the term ‘formally investigative’ of this poetry, we are also suggesting that the investigation of reality and the investigation of, experimentation with, form and forms are coterminous, equivalent, perhaps not, in the final analysis, to be determined apart. It should be clear—my slip from ‘form’ to ‘forms’ above hints as much—that I am not only thinking about particular poetic forms (sonnet, villanelle) which impose their formal patterning upon semantic movement, although the sonnet will be scrutinized in the third chapter and re-visited in the fourth. Yet neither is this simply an argument for free verse, whose long tradition is well-assimilated into the poetry I shall be examining; Robert Creeley’s aphorism, quoted by Charles Olson, that ‘form is never more than an extension of content’ oddly underplays form (Hoover 1994: 614), whereas Denise Levertov’s re-phrasing of this as ‘Form is never more than a *revelation* of content’ recasts the distinction in terms of post-Coleridgean organicism, but still maintains the separation of content and

form (Hoover 1994: 632). Fixed form or free form—open or closed—is not the issue here, and much of the poetics of contemporary poetry, even I have to admit as a scholar of its forms, is of little help on this specific point, although Charles Bernstein’s affirmation that ‘poetry is aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms’ comes close (Bernstein 1992: 2), and Clark Coolidge’s declaration, ‘I don’t want to use the word *form*, I want to use the word *forms*. The word is plural’, may be inadvertently prescient for my argument (Coolidge 1978: 147). What is at stake is the agency of form: how it extends, reveals or—in my terms—enacts, enfolds, and becomes content.

Before moving forward onto new theoretical ground, it is worth considering the academic—rather than the literary—context of this critical perspective. ‘Since the era of high theory in the 1980s’, writes Peter Barry summarily,

we have seen various ‘turns’, including the ‘turn’ to history ... the turn to ethics, and the turn to aesthetics. Of course, all these ‘turns’ are really *returns*, and in particular they are returns of what was repressed by the two revolutions in twentieth-century English Studies (the Cambridge-led textual revolution of the 1920s, and the Paris-led theory revolution of the 1970s). (Barry 2003: 196)

My previous studies have demonstrated these various turns, though not I hope in any programmatic way—the linguistic turn of *Far Language* (1999b); the ethical turn of *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents, 1950–2000* (2005); and the historical turn of *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry* (2011a)—though throughout there has been a concern for poetics as a speculative writerly discourse.¹ Yet at another level, I see these works forming a unity in terms of my larger project of the study of the forms and poetics of British (and associated) writing of an avant-garde persuasion.

The aesthetic turn was announced by books such as Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) and Joughin’s and Malpas’ edited collection *The New Aestheticism* (2003). But even as recently as 2013, Derek Attridge, in the volume *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry*, was expressing cautious optimism about the future: ‘It is perhaps too early to tell whether the current hints of a revived interest in formal matters are harbingers of a major shift, but it seems a distinct possibility’ (Attridge 2013: 21–22). This turn accompanied a return to ‘form’ in its broadest

sense, as a corrective to readings of literature that privilege ‘content’: ‘instrumental readings’ Attridge calls them, and they derive in part from what Barry calls the second revolution, and partly from the demand for ‘relevant’ or socially comprehensible literature in schools and the academy (Attridge 2004a: 6–10).² The danger of such theory-driven instrumental reading whose ‘signature’ is ‘reading-as-paraphrase’ is its prejudicial nature and the lack of (aesthetic) surprise in reading, as Ellen Rooney says: ‘Our arguments are familiar before they are even developed, yet they remain unpersuasive to the skeptical ... because they fail to uncover formal features not known in advance’ (Wolfson and Brown 2006: 39). The text is ‘read’ before it is encountered, meshed in a grid of extra-literary concepts, and the quality of attention and nature of the aesthetic encounter remain unconsidered.

My own work (as poet-critic, as pedagogue of creative writing) has always foregrounded ‘form’, and as such I have some right to feel ironic toward crusading rhetoric or hushed reverent murmurings in favor of what has been second nature to my thinking for some years.³ As Attridge puts it: ‘Poets, of course, have never ceased to be interested in form’ (Attridge 2013: 19). I have always concurred (or have since I first publicly professed literary beliefs) with the Russian Formalists, in the definition of defamiliarization offered by Shklovsky, that ‘the technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult’, where the former relies upon the latter for the purpose of ‘impart(ing) the sensation of things as they are perceived’ (Shklovsky 1965: 12).⁴ Two of the earliest influences upon my critical thinking (and poetics) were formalist in derivation. The first was Herbert Marcuse’s *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), with its insistence that ‘in its autonomy art both protests’ prevailing social realities, ‘and at the same time transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness’ (Marcuse 1978: 25). More epigrammatically: ‘The autonomy of art contains the categorical imperative: things must change’ (Marcuse 1978: 13). Later, through this, I accessed Adorno’s monumental negative version of the imperative, in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), in which the spirit of aesthetic form carries a tortured utopian critique, even if the matter of a particular artwork is tainted by history’s evils and society’s inequities, and even if it is not. ‘The unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form’, as Adorno says (Adorno 2002: 6), although he is careful to state that ‘formal elements are not facily interpretable in political terms’, that is as direct content (Adorno 2002: 255). He expresses a belief in the irreducibility of form: ‘Form repudiates the

view that artworks are immediately given' (Adorno 2002: 144). In accordance with my general argument here, Adorno maintains that 'formalism' fundamentally asserts the condition of 'art being art' (Adorno 2002: 144). The chapter 'Form and the Antagonisms of Reality: Barry MacSweeney's Sin Signs' returns to this theoretical monolith to pick up on the unresolved antagonisms of theory.

The second influence is re-visited in detail in the chapter 'Veronica Forrest-Thomson: Poetic Artifice and Naturalization in Theory and Practice', on Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice* (1978), which also repudiates the non-mediated view of art. She valorizes what she calls the non-meaningful devices of poetry, which she arranges as levels of artifice; meaning can be read only as torqued by artifice in defiance of a method of reading called 'naturalisation', which she defines as the 'attempt to reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organisation by making it intelligible, by translating it into a statement about the non-verbal external world, by making the Artifice appear natural' (Forrest-Thomson 1978: xi). Our best reading occurs when this process is resisted *almost* successfully and artifice shines most artificially. In the chapter, Forrest-Thomson's schema of levels of artifice is supplemented by another neglected book of the 1970s, Yuri Lotman's *Analysis of the Poetic Text* (1976), whose multi-systemic modeling of the literary work, rather than its semiology, seems both a fitting extension of the work of the Russian Formalists and a way of suggesting that the mutual interference, rather than the blending or cooperation, of levels, is what creates formal complexity in a poetic text.

The axiomatic sense that an unexamined form is not worth reading opposes instrumental readings that temper textuality with *social* naturalizations. Writing about what is sometimes called 'linguistically innovative' poetry that works by defamiliarization, undecidability, or through structural and linguistic complexity, and radical poetic artifice, means that I take form to be unavoidable as an issue, though it seems not to be in other areas of literary (or cultural) studies, though even to say so should seem odd, particularly with Rooney's minatory words ringing in our ears. My critical and poetic commitment to the discourse of writerly poetics also necessarily focuses upon form.

I turn to the aesthetic 'turn', particularly its re-evaluations of the supremely rich pickings of Romantic poetry, with recognition, but also with perplexity at the vehemence of the position-taking by some of its

proponents. The main target for their attacks are the New Historicist critics; the accusation is, bluntly put, that New Historicism plays fast and loose with historical data and contextual information, and forces this to (pre-) determine interpretation, often ideologically constructed, whatever the formal evidence of the text. Alan Rawes offers a nuanced but critical summary: ‘Key to each of these readings ... is the idea of reading silences about social and political realities and issues, and reading into those silences deliberate acts of ideologically motivated exclusion—or, to use McGann’s now famous word, “displacement”’ (Rawes 2007: 96). The greatest antagonist in some versions of this affront is indeed Jerome McGann, but I find his comments about reading Shelley, in *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), salutary: ‘Poetry’s critical gift to every future age’ is ‘that alienated vantage’ afforded by the speaker in a poem being ‘removed from us in the set of his mind’, which paradoxically ‘permits us a brief objective glimpse at our world and our selves’ (McGann 1983: 66). While baulking perhaps at ‘critical’ and ‘objective’, this seems to me to be wise in its recognition of the power of alterity in our historical readings. We encounter works of art from the past not because they are our surprising contemporaries but because they are so evidently not.

McGann comments: ‘If the critic lays art under the microscope, a mordant eye returns his quizzing gaze’ (McGann 1983: 151–152). McGann’s image is an uneasy one; the critic appears in scientific mode, objectively subduing art as a microscopic entity, but finding an eye-to-eye encounter, where disinterested acquisitive ‘quizzing’ is met by an intersubjective response that seems atavistic in its potential ferocity. This is a standoff, with critic and art object mutually eyeballing one another’s otherness. If McGann is suggesting alterity is the primary power of art, then this could be the return of the ‘alienated vantage’ with a vengeance. In one possible reading, this instrument of revenge—less the eye that can be seen and more the dynamic mordancy that is intuited in it—is form.

Clearly, contextual and historical evidence can hold—and obscure—an object in a vise-like grip of determination, but an overly technical attention to poetic artifice runs its own risk of replacing generous response with formal description, as evinced in part by New Criticism, itself the progeny of the first revolution described by Barry with its ‘practical criticism’. This is why the name New Formalism has been used by some of the recent critics to distinguish their practice from the old. They are less interested in New Critical themes, such as the autonomy of the artwork and in questions of formal coherence, or of aesthetic unity and issues of

ambiguity—for example, whether embodied in the well-wrought urn the old critics borrowed from Donne, or the supernal isolate one they ventriloquized after Keats. Rawes comments on this new approach: ‘Where an interest in unity and totality does surface, these are thought about at arm’s length from New Criticism and in the context of very different traditions of thought’ (Rawes 2007: xiii). Whatever the approach (and it varies) the dynamic passion that drives contemporary formalist criticism is best summarized by Garrett Stewart: ‘The formalist imperative is to read, to read what is written as form (and formation) of meaning, both authorially designed and culturally inferred’ (Stewart 2006: 256). This passion seems lacking, for example, in the non-evaluative semiology of Lotman, which is one reason why it is used selectively in this study.

Before we take solace in the vantage of formal criticism, it is worth examining Virgil Nemoianu’s arguments in ‘Hating and Loving Aesthetic Formalism’, published in one of the New Formalists’ founding documents, the anthology *Reading for Form* (2006), to examine what formalist purity might look like in its least appealing apparel: ‘In a philosophical vision that will admit some (any!) kind of transcendence, aesthetic formalism might act as a link between the immanent and the transcendent. It might be, for instance, a substitute for the latter; it might be one of its foreshadowings; it might mirror it’ (Nemoianu 2006: 64). A neo-Paterist aestheticism underlines what appears to be a Kantian formulation, but is not quite. Formalism bears the promises of transcendence on its broad shoulders, to deliver us from materialism while hinting at the spiritual. While aesthetic ‘writing incorporates complexity and multiplicity, “over-determination”, multidimensionality, the dialectics of harmony and contradictoriness, the coexistence of displeasure with the pleasures and hopes of beauty’, we are told, ‘New Historicism and related movements’—which are aligned summarily with totalitarian regimes of left and right—‘den[y] the existence of a human nature and essence and replaces them with negativity, conflict, adversariness, and, at bottom, hatred as the central value and ultimate motivation of human behavior’ (Nemoianu 2006: 56). In this account, postmodernist terms such as multiplicity rub shoulders with liberal humanist values and unexamined claims on behalf of the immutable human soul. The mordancy of this defense is unappealing, as much as its terms are suspect in a postmodern world conceived of as one of multiple spaces populated by dynamic forces of subjectivation, for example. It is a relief that one editor of *Reading for Form*, the influential formalist Susan J. Wolfson, comments, in contrast to this narrow compass, ‘The vitality of

reading for form is freedom from program and manifesto, from any uniform discipline' (Wolfson and Brown 2006: 5).

We must be wary about what work form might be asked to perform in the service of other causes, beware of anti-instrumental instrumentalisms. As Attridge says: 'It would be a pity if formal analysis, which could play a major part in a reevaluation of literature as a cultural practice and an individual experience, became just another tool to "prove" the critic right' (Attridge 2013: 27).⁵

Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004a) and its 'supplement', *The Work of Literature* (2015), provide synthetic theoretical navigation of the potentially choppy waters of revitalized formalism (Attridge 2015: 11).⁶ Attridge offers the following summary of his tightly argued *The Singularity of Literature*, picking up on his active redefinition of form through descriptions of events of readerly engagement, and of 'forming' as per-forming, and emphasizing formal innovation's transformation of the field of cultural production.⁷ (He also outlines the almost necessary sense, even trust, we have in artistic form that carries a promissory note of significance through the fact of it having been intentionally authored, and I return to this issue in the chapter 'The Trace of Poetry and the Non-Poetic: Conceptual Writing and Appropriation in Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place and John Seed').

The *singularity* of the artwork is not simply a matter of difference from other works ... but a transformative difference ... that involves the irruption of *otherness* or *alterity* into the cultural field. And this combination of singularity and alterity is further specified by *inventiveness*: the work comes into being, through an act that is also an event, as an *authored* entity ... Works of art are distinctive in the demand they make for a *performance* ... in which the authored singularity, alterity, and inventiveness of the work as an exploitation of the multiple powers of language are experienced and affirmed in the present, in a creative, responsible reading. But performance ... is a matter both of performing and being performed by the work: hence the *eventness* of the reading ... is crucial. (Attridge 2004a: 136)⁸

This is a rich modeling of the operations of form in, and the constitution of form by, acts of reading and response. I will elaborate on their operations via readings of the works of other formalist critics, and touch on some themes and develop a methodology that arises from these works and will inform the rest of this study.⁹

Susan J. Wolfson's *Formal Charges* (1997) is an account of 'the shaping of poetry in British Romanticism', to borrow the subtitle of her book, which echoes the active sense of the forming of form, in Attridge's terms. Angela Leighton draws out the implications of Wolfson's title: 'To regard form, not as a shape, an object, or technique, but as a "charge", with all its headlong, economic, even judicial connotations, is to release it from stasis. Form does not stay still; in many senses, it "charges"' (Leighton 2007: 24). While focusing on the six major (male) Romantic poets, Wolfson selects lesser-known texts and reads them both formally and in terms of historical and social contexts that are often revealed by textual practices, proof of Barthes' suggestive aphorism 'that a little formalism turns one away from History, but a lot brings one back to it' (Wolfson 1997: 18–19).¹⁰ These readings alone are invaluable; they are the kinds of transformative and creative readings that do not leave the object of study unchanged; they are singular and inventive, to use Attridge's terms. Wolfson professes concern with 'events of particular forms (those stanzas, verses, meters, rhymes, and the line)' (Wolfson 1997: 3). She quotes Attridge's work as prosodist: poetic forms 'resist incorporation "into the kind of interpretation we habitually give to linguistic utterances"; they are not transparent', she adds (Wolfson 1997: 3). She argues that formalism is inherent in the poetic theory and poetics of Romanticism itself: 'What distinguishes Wordsworth's enactment is the way his verse form operates as a trope for its own formalism' (Wolfson 1997: 28). Forming, in Attridge's sense, is evinced by *The Prelude*: 'The powers that form the mind ... are staged in a scene of which the poet's mind is not just a reflector but the formulator' (Wolfson 1997: 28). She studies Romanticism's 'involvement with poetic form' with the aim of showing 'how these texts submit cultural information to the pressure of aesthetic practice, and in doing so not only contribute to the cultural text but apply their own critical intelligence' in order to refashion New Historicism's supposed social and ideological focus, so that such matters may be read *through* or *in* form (Wolfson 1997: 30). She is combatant in her ultimate credo: 'My deepest claim is that language shaped by poetic form is not simply conscriptable as information for other frameworks of analysis; the forms themselves demand a specific kind of critical attention' (Wolfson 1997: 30).

Formal Charges is not just a potent polemic for 'showing how the forms of poetry can have their own agency' (Wolfson 1997: 231–232), but is an exemplar of a formalist methodology that avoids the New Critical value judgment that—in Welleck and Warren's terms—the tighter the

organisation of the poem, the higher its value', which reduces form to a will toward unity (Wolfson 1997: 167). However, her methodology retains the virtue of New Criticism's recognition that 'form and content cannot be separated' or, even more radically, that 'form is content', as Cleanth Brooks puts it (Wolfson 1997: 168). Her reading of Keats is one of the highlights of the volume, because it is here that earlier formalism is dealt with head-on. The reputation of Keats' odes as the ultimate New Critical well-wrought urns is dependent upon their appeal to this will toward unity, formal, structural, or semantic. Wolfson turns her attention to Keats' neglected late sonnets to show not the superlative qualities of 'intense organization arising from the strict discipline of a critical intelligence', as Marshall McLuhan puts it of the odes, but to trace the formal adventure of these sonnets (Wolfson 1997: 168). This involves, in part, a formal engagement with, and negotiation of, the frame of the sonnet, but is also 'a problematic of form ... at play' more generally, troping on form itself within poetic form and undertaking 'an investigation of poetic forms as factitious, temporary and situated', as though Keats himself were a formalist critic with a deconstructive tinge (Wolfson 1997: 192). While her quasi-deconstructive reading of Coleridge centers upon his tropic play and indeterminacy, particularly with regards to his use of simile that his formalist poetics overtly devalues, the genetic approach to Wordsworth shows how revisionary stages of *The Prelude* articulate and self-interrogate a dynamic process of unfinished forming. Byron's *The Corsair* is read almost entirely through its use of the heroic couplet, particularly the formal-semantic connections of rhyme, which is not merely a tracking of the reappearance of a single element of poetic artifice, but is presented as a revelation of the social experience of the poem's readership, through a paradoxically aristocratic mode of mediating the 'rebellious individualism' of Byron's unstable public and political persona (Wolfson 1997: 163). Shelley is similarly read in social terms, and again often through rhyme (and through resonances of certain potential rhyming words—crypt words—that are absent from the text but which form its chiming under-song, as it were).¹¹ Contrasting the supposedly social texts relating to political unrest after the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 (paradoxically unpublished in Shelley's lifetime but touchstones for various later radicalisms from Chartism onwards) with the intensely personal late lyrics (often left in manuscript or even woven between the manuscripts of other poems), a complex relationship between poetic form and social form is established. However, this is a reading that argues against formalism's severest critics

(such as Bourdieu or the New Historicists), and states that ‘each poem is ... a specific event that is not equivalent to the dictates of tradition or their degree of force in the historical moment of its composition’, while its ‘forms are informed by personal motivations, domestic interactions, political developments, social and cultural contradictions, and receptions both actual and imagined’, to quote from Wolfson’s own summary of the various contexts she brings to bear on her readings throughout the book (Wolfson 1997: 231). More accurately, and elegantly, in terms that reflect the brilliance and subtlety of her method, these contexts arise through and within the discussion of formal relations and poetic artifice, so that they feel as much a part of poetic form as they do of the world. Form is the book’s content, and content is traced arising in form. Wolfson insists her formalism indeed brings one back to history: ‘Reading the local particularities of events in form, we discover the most complex measures of human art—the terms of its durable, social, political, and psychological interest. We also feel the charge of an historically persistent, forever various, aesthetic vitality’ (Wolfson 1997: 232). As Michael Schmidt notes of modalities of reading: ‘History and politics can play a part: they propose questions. In poetry the answers come not as argument but as form’ (Schmidt 1999: 2).

Part of this ‘vitality of reading for form’ might be dissipated, if we lack definitional exactitude. Turning specifically to poetry, form can mean the identifiable formal properties of a text, the poetic artifice that Forrest-Thomson writes about as the ‘non-meaningful levels of language’ (Forrest-Thomson 1978: xiv): ‘all the rhythmic, phonetic, verbal and logical devices which make poetry different from prose’ (Forrest-Thomson 1978: iv). Form, as the chapter ‘Convention and Constraint: Form in the Innovative Sonnet Sequence’ will show, can also ‘refer to an abstract structure or arrangement (“the sonnet form”) or the specific properties of a single work (“the unique form of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116”)’ (Attridge 2004a: 107), as Attridge points out, reminding us that German uses ‘*Form* for the former and *Gestalt* for the latter’, a distinction which could be clumsily accommodated in English, but seldom is (Attridge 2004a: 107).

A nuts and bolts emphasis upon devicehood complements Attridge’s sense that form is the *force* that stages a performance of the text, but he insists that devices of artifice ‘are precisely what call forth the performative response’ of any engaged reader, directly connected to the event of singularity which is the irruption of an inventive otherness in our productive reading (Attridge 2004a: 118). Forms have to be formed.

The event of the literary work is a *formal* event, involving among other things, or rather among other happenings, shifts in register, allusions to other discourses, ... the patterning of rhythms, the linking of rhymes, the ordering of sections, the movement of syntax, the echoing of sounds: all operating in a temporal medium to surprise, lull, intrigue, satisfy. (Attridge 2015: 117)

We need to apprehend ‘the eventness of the literary work, which means that form needs to be understood verbally—as “taking form”, of “forming”, or even “losing form”’ (Attridge 2004a: 113). Attridge states:

What I carry away from my reading of the poem is not primarily an idea or an image ... but a memory of this specific sequence of words, a memory suffused by the qualities of my experience of them ... As long as I retain a memory of the ‘form’ of the words ... I retain something of the poem. (Attridge 2004a: 112–113)

This way of conceiving form, as a process of forming, leaving a trace of its eventhood, he contends, complicates the distinction between form and content; what is staged by form’s very presence is meaning and feeling, sense and affect. ‘We apprehend these so-called “formal” features as *already meaningful*, and meaningful in a particular context’ (Attridge 2004a: 113).

However, even the strict mistress of the non-meaningful, Forrest-Thomson, writes about *internal* expansion and limitation as the process by which the external world is admitted to a reading only by permission of the artifice, ‘by selecting and ordering external contexts’, as they are read out of the poem into ‘the world and back’, as she puts it (Forrest-Thomson 1978: 36). Attridge describes this from the other side, when he says: ‘The effect of this mobilization of meaning by formal properties is that the text can never close down on a represented world, can never become solely the reflection of or a pointer to a set of existents outside language’ (Attridge 2004a: 118–119). We read through form, and through its forms we make meaning—a meaning which is not static, but open to further re-forming in consequent productive acts of reading. We open the reading outward to the world to embrace the relevant contextual ‘objects’ and fold them back into readings of its formal structures, as both Wolfson and Forrest-Thomson variously demonstrate. Such an approach, Attridge suggests, is ‘form without formalism’, new or old (Attridge 2004a: 119). All artifice becomes meaning. ‘It’s through formed language that we’re

invited to participate in its emotion-arousing capacities; this means we feel the emotions, but always as performances of language's power' (Attridge 2015: 267).

In a slightly different aesthetic mode, Peter de Bolla's *Art Matters* (2001) gives quiet but unwavering voice to his 'mutism' (De Bolla 2001: 5) before the 'affective' qualities of great artworks (a painting by Barnett Newman, a recording of Bach by Glenn Gould, and a Wordsworth poem) (De Bolla 2001: 8). He avoids the potential fixity of aestheticist questions such as 'What is art?' (De Bolla 2001: 11) in favor of flexible explorations of his hospitable 'sense of wonder' (De Bolla 2001: 16) before these works (which is to be distinguished from effects of surprise, shock, or sensation) through 'the materiality of an affective response' to them (De Bolla 2001: 138). De Bolla's is partly an intersubjective account of his highly cultured encounters, and his readings 'illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach', as Attridge puts it, in that it is fascinating in its personal engagement, but it is impossible to generalize from its attempts to describe 'wonder' (Attridge 2004a: 157). Attridge, as we have seen, prefers the word 'forming' to form, to cover these events that happen as irruptions of otherness, eventualities of invention that both thinkers call 'singularity'. Attridge is able to tame wonder into the model of a process that is less mute abandonment to form, and more openness to the otherness of form as a forming staging process, along with a commitment to critical commentary that is far from 'mute'.

However, de Bolla poses one question which arises from this 'radical singularity of *aesthetic* experience' (De Bolla 2001: 137), which introduces a nagging theme that recurs in formalist criticism and which concerns the cognitive value of form: 'What does the text know of this, what does it know that the reader (as yet) does not, perhaps cannot?' (de Bolla 2001: 120). What does any artwork know, a knowledge that even its creator might not possess? 'I have asked if my responses give me knowledge', he muses (De Bolla 2001: 134). Importantly, de Bolla conjectures whether the cognitive values of artworks derive from their formal material properties during his encounters. His useful general answer is in the affirmative, but it is tempered by his suggestion that 'what is required ... is a radically different conception of knowledge' (De Bolla 2001: 134):

This kind of knowledge would not be exclusively the property of an agent, not something I own or could be said to be familiar with. It would also be within the artwork, something, as it were, known to it. Although it makes

no sense to talk of this as propositional knowledge, it is equally unsatisfactory to dismiss out of hand the sense of knowing that is made apparent to me in an *aesthetic* encounter. I prefer to call this knowing rather than knowledge since it is more like a state of mind than an item of knowledge. (De Bolla 2001: 135)

Robert Eaglestone, in ‘Knowledge and the Truth of Literature’ (published in *The New Aestheticism*), contrasts two modalities of truth, cognate with these revised senses of ‘knowledge’ and ‘knowing’. On the one hand, there is propositional truth, ‘often identified with scientific understandings of the world. Assertions made under this way of understanding truth can ... be proved or disproved’ (Eaglestone 2003: 152). On the other hand, there is existential truth, an unfolding cognitive growth, one indeed associated with works of art and with Heidegger’s essay ‘On the Origin of the Work of Art’, in which he ‘argues that artworks do not simply represent reality as assertions do (though they do do this). More importantly and more fundamentally, they open up or “unconceal” the world ... Art is able to break “open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual” because of its nature as what Heidegger calls “poetry”’ (Eaglestone 2003: 153). As with truth, so with knowledge; it can be either propositional or existential, knowledge or knowing.¹²

Simon Jarvis, in a series of scattered articles, has ‘been trying to explore the question of whether music’ in poetry, and particularly its prosody, ‘need be opposed to thinking’ (Jarvis 2011: 7). He raises a similar concern in his article ‘Prosody as Cognition’ (1998a), where he conjectures: ‘It would be possible to begin thinking about the birth of prosody only upon condition that we stopped thinking of the bodily, and the musical, as the non-cognitive vessels for a cognitive content’ (Jarvis 1998a: 11). Form (or one aspect of it, its containing qualities) would no longer be a body disembodied from meaning. Jarvis asks us to ‘imagine’ ‘a study of [John] Wilkinson in which it could be understood how the most helpless scraps of print or chatter, are made prosodically animated’ (Jarvis 1998a: 12), but offers few clues as to how this ‘materialism of the beautiful’ could come into being, one whereby we might come ‘to understand a single affective duration not as the endless repetition of an instantaneous passage from being into nothing, the foundation of any possible ontology. In the printed melody of verse is heard ... news that such experience is’ (Jarvis 2011: 13).¹³ The tortuous syntax betrays the political and philosophic force that is exerted upon this aspiration, the conditional imagination that promises political

utopia, even if it is Adorno's aesthetic utopia 'draped in black' (Adorno 2002: 135). Taking the cognitive qualities of form more generally, Jarvis states: 'Art thinks historically, and that what it knows, when it thinks well, is natural-historical experience' (Jarvis 2011: 7). His first axiom is that 'technique is the way art thinks' (Jarvis 2011: 7). Elsewhere Jarvis affirms that 'technique ... is itself cognitive and critical, not purely instrumental craft', which broadens his analysis to all levels of artifice and form, and to poesis and praxis generally (Jarvis 1998b: 108). In other words, 'technique knows something about the world. Yet it knows it, Adorno suggests, just by the most obsessive, and perhaps even the most fetishistic and solipsistic, absorption in its own proper stuff', that is, in its form (Jarvis 2011: 7). Form, Adorno reminds us, is 'the objective organisation within each artwork of what appears to be bindingly eloquent', but it has an eloquence of its own (Adorno 2002: 143).

Although Attridge opines, 'When a work *seems* to be possessed of its own capacity to think, to question, to harbour knowledge, so much so that we call on metaphors that supply it with a brain, a will, a consciousness, it's a sign of both its otherness and its inventiveness' (Attridge 2015: 253; emphasis mine), this apprehension—he dubs it 'anthropomorphism'—does not alone account for an artwork's cognitive aspects (and will and consciousness are not at issue here) (Attridge 2015: 242). An artwork does not simply provide 'a performance of knowing or thinking' (Attridge 2015: 255). To regard cognition as having independent existence outside the brain, inherent in things in general (or in artistic form in particular), is not a metaphorical or mystical formulation, and indeed, is a 'materialism of the beautiful'. It can be conceived of as a variety of 'material engagement' in the light of a cognitive theory that takes that very name as its own. Lambros Malafouris' *How Things Shape the Mind* (2013) contrasts internalist views of mind, in which a Cartesian entity computes and calibrates a world it cannot enter, with his own externalist one that recognizes 'the intersection between cognition and material culture' (Malafouris 2013: 17). It sees the mind as engaging, and interacting with, learning from and with, the world, and entering it via means of what he calls 'the extended mind' (Malafouris 2013: 17). 'For active externalism, marks made with a pen on paper are not an ongoing external record of the contents of mental states; they are an extension of those states' (Malafouris 2013: 74). One result of this might be a poem. It follows that 'cognition has no location', or no fixed location between mind and things (Malafouris 2013: 85). Malafouris is an archaeologist and his examples are prehistoric as well