CAROLINE LEVINE. **Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network**. Pp. xviii + 174. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. £19.95.

Caroline Levine's defence of formalism is also a return to first principles, a bold reappraisal of a critical paradigm. Before making her case for the intellectual and political value of formalist analysis, she commences her argument with a definition of 'form' itself: the word 'always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*' (p. 3; Levine's italics). Levine is quick to recognise that, in her field of literary studies, this definition of form as pattern (or as arrangement or ordered shape) may be viewed as 'an expansion of the word *form* so broad as to make it meaningless' (p. 2; Levine's italics). She pre-empts this criticism with the argument that the concept of form has never been exclusively aesthetic, and that literary understandings of form need to be examined in conjunction with the plethora of philosophical and sociopolitical meanings that also crowd around the word. To the extent that this argument is persuasive, it is because the book broadly succeeds in making good on its opening assertions, drawing on concepts from design theory, literary criticism, and the social sciences in order to analyse the structural patterns of a diverse set of forms, from poems, novels, and television series to legal cases, corporate institutions, and gender norms. At a time when interdisciplinarity is a virtue often claimed and rather less often practised, *Forms* is a genuinely interdisciplinary book, and Levine exhibits considerable ambition and intellectual dexterity in her integration of different disciplinary perspectives.

At the same time, though, the book is also firmly (even fiercely) loyal to its author's disciplinary roots: Levine's definition of 'form' is so broad because, in her view, the methods of literary criticism can be applied to all forms. She states that 'it is time to *export*' the 'practices' of literary analysis, 'to take our traditional skills to new objects—the social

structures and institutions that are among the most crucial sites of political efficacy' (p. 23; Levine's italics). This confidence in literary criticism's potential for expansion will be heartening for scholars in that field, but it also raises a big question about the similarities and differences between literary and social forms. It is fair to say that literary texts, films, corporate institutions, and the law are all forms, in the sense that they all depend on particular spatial and temporal patternings of experience, but does it necessarily follow that these different types of form can be examined and interpreted using the same critical methods? Literary critics are trained to study a limited set of formal materials: the syntactic structures, semantic content, and acoustic arrangements of language; stylistic features such as metaphors and other rhetorical devices; and organising patterns such as metre or narrative. Some or all of these materials may also be present in social structures and political institutions, but their functions within those forms are radically different, and the transfer of analytical skills from literary to social patterns may not be as straightforward a process as Levine suggests.

The central argument of the book is that different forms collide and intersect, generating surprising and possibly liberating results; Levine's critical practice aims 'to set forms against one another in disruptive and aleatory as well as rigidly containing ways' (p. 40). Levine argues that, in any specific phenomenon (whether a literary text or, for example, a bureaucracy), there is never one dominant form; instead, multiple patterns and structures of experience compete with one another, disrupting any claims to semantic authority or political hegemony. This argument is aptly demonstrated through the structure of the book, as Levine uses its four middle chapters to trace the ways in which different versions of her four chosen forms (wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks) collide with one another and with other formal structures.

Less convincing, however, are Levine's efforts to demonstrate the originality of her position. She argues that recent adherents of 'new formalist' criticism (and new historicist

scholars before them) 'read literary form as epiphenomenal, growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes' (p. 12). These critics, in other words, assume that certain forms (typically social or political) are dominant, while others (often cultural or literary) are secondary, and Levine seeks to correct this assumption by restoring a disruptive agency to literary forms, and by placing them on an equal footing with social forms. The criticism that historically informed or politically engaged scholarship reduces aesthetic objects to symptoms or epiphenomena of social conditions is an old one, but it ignores the sophistication with which the best new historicist or new formalist criticism analyses the complex relations between literary texts and historical contexts. Levine is arguably correcting a problem that has already been frequently addressed. Nonetheless, her focus on what she terms the 'multiplication' of form (p. 46) is a valuable contribution to critical theory; astute criticism, this book shows, must attend to the range of competing formal patterns at work in any text, event, or social structure.

The final chapter of the book is an analysis of the television series *The Wire*, in which Levine capably demonstrates that the series can be interpreted as a critical juxtaposition of different sociopolitical units, hierarchies, networks, and rhythms. The advantages of Levine's method, however, and also its limitations, are more concisely conveyed in her reading of *Bleak House* in the penultimate chapter. Levine presents this reading as a kind of formalism without formalism, a 'literary criticism turned upside-down', the purpose of which 'is less to use formalist methods to read Dickens than to use Dickens to throw light on the operations of social form' (p. 122). She argues that *Bleak House* is constructed around a set of overlapping networks (for example the city, the family, contagious disease, and the law) that variously correlate with and disrupt one another. Such an analysis is persuasive on its own terms, but it risks reducing literary form (as Levine accuses other critics of doing) to an inert container of social concerns. As her analysis unfolds, however, Levine demonstrates that Dickens's

examination of social forms is structured, in a specifically literary way, by the shape of his plot; she observes that Dickens uses 'a formal feature of the Victorian novel that has not often been theorized—sheer length' to enact the dizzying scope and complexity of nineteenth-century social networks (p. 127). As Levine argues throughout this book, literary form is active in its rewriting of sociopolitical forms. If formalist analysis is to grasp and understand this activity, then it needs to focus not just on social patterns and political structures, but, first and foremost, on the specificities of literary texts.

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