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## Formalism and Time

Catherine Gallagher

The most prominent generic features of the novel have received remarkably little systematic attention in our criticism. “A lengthy fictional prose narrative”: that is the definition of the novel I learned in high school, and I am still mulling over each one of its terms. In *Nobody’s Story* I tried explicating as well as historicizing *fictional*, and I have recently been pondering *lengthy*, the most thoroughly neglected word in the definition. Length has generally been treated by theorists of narrative under the headings of time, temporality, and duration, and a cursory survey of these analyses reveals numerous ways of rendering sequence simultaneous. For example, Mieke Bal, in considering the relation between the time of an element of a fabula and the time of its narration, argues that we should examine only the relative patterning: “The attention paid to the various elements gives us a picture of the vision on the fabula which is being communicated to the reader.”<sup>1</sup> Since the relation of parts to each other is the relevant question, the length of the novel ceases to count; the internal pattern of *The Last Chronicle of Barsetshire* may be set down as concisely as that of *The Turn of the Screw*. Nothing in this sort of temporal analysis would help us develop a concept of length.

Bal’s procedure is typical of narratologists, whose fondness for graphs and charts is notorious. One, for example, graphs the rhythm of long stretches of narrative time; another pictures successive ideological choices as the corners of a single box; yet another compresses the infinite variety of agents and acts that might be encountered over

<sup>1</sup> Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 101.

time in any possible narrative into six basic actants. Just as charts are typical of formalist studies of narrative *structure*, attention to the grammatical features of single sentences characterizes analyses of narrative *discourse*. Charts and sentences attest to our need to make the narrative object as short as possible. As David Carroll pointed out over a decade ago, they appeal to our continuing desire to see, in a single, instantaneous act of perception, things that are, in fact, not visible, and he correctly asserted that such formalisms rest on an oculocentric bias.<sup>2</sup> I would like to discuss another bias that seems to me implicit in them: a bias against the very thing under analysis, that is, extended temporal sequence—length—itsself. Formalist analyses seem bent on showing that, although a novel represents temporal sequence by means of temporal sequence, it nevertheless has, or should have, a *form* that can be made apprehensible all at once, in a picture or a fractal.

I have already described two quite different kinds of narrative analysis as “formalist.” Narratological graphs and charts represent forms in the sense of structures that organize, arrange, or order the parts of a narrative. This sense of *form* is perhaps the oldest use of the term in aesthetics,<sup>3</sup> and when Fredric Jameson makes a Greimasian diagram of the ideological elements to be combined in Balzac’s *Cousine Bette*, or when Gerard Genette lists the relative speeds of events in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, they are engaged in the classical activity of displaying the overall shape, indeed the symmetry or shape-

<sup>2</sup> Carroll, “Diachrony and Synchrony in Fiction/History: Reading *Histoire*,” in *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 140–60.

<sup>3</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz enumerates five uses of the term *form* in aesthetics: (1) “the disposition, arrangement, or order of parts” as distinct from the parts themselves; (2) that which is “directly given to the senses,” or “style” in literature, as distinct from “content”; (3) “the boundary or contour of a work,” as distinct from its matter; (4) “the conceptual essence” of a work, or its “entelechy,” as distinct from its accidents; (5) the Kantian notion of “a contribution of the mind to the perceived object” (“Form in the History of Aesthetics,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, vol. 2 [New York: Scribner, 1973], 216).

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liness, of these novels. However, the Russian formalists, as well as the more recent analysts of narrative discourse, often mean something different by *form*: they mean the style of the work, the grammar, syntax, verb modes and tenses, and rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> Their analyses descend from late antiquity and usually involve claims for the specialness of literary, or fictional, style, specifying its significant departures from normal narrative grammar.

We might think of these two ideas of form as opposites, for a picture of the general relation of a narrative's elements results from a process of abstraction, whereas the features of its individual sentences are supposedly more sensually immediate and concrete. Form as arrangement or structure seems molar, an outline of the whole; form as style seems molecular, an enlargement of a detail. Form as structure comes into view only from a distance; form as style requires unusually close proximity. Structuralists tend to translate time into space; stylistics translates it into tense. Deleuze and Guattari argued that these are not simply different modes of analysis but irreconcilable levels of the text, and it has also been claimed that the molecular level of analysis, with its attention to momentary and often disruptive details, discloses the temporal dimension of the text, which is obscured when a narrative's structure is conceived as spatial. However, for all of their contrasts, both versions of form may be said to arrest narrative flow, one by generalizing an enduring pattern toward which the moments contribute and the other by freezing a moment for analysis. They both give the impression of overcoming time, rising above or congealing it, and hence, whatever their virtues, they appear strangely at odds with the temporal nature of the analyzed work.<sup>5</sup>

This is not a new idea: that form contends against time, that form and time are opposed, almost goes without saying. Moreover, it has been quite widely recognized that the opposition presents a problem

<sup>4</sup>Gerald Prince distinguishes between narratologists who study stories and those who study narrative discourse in *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987). I align Prince's distinction with Tatarkiewicz's first two meanings of *form*: order of parts and style.

<sup>5</sup>This point is made frequently in Paul Ricoeur's magisterial *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–88). Ricoeur proposes a dialectic of time and its narrative configuration; he addresses the issue of length in fiction most fully in his analysis of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (2:112–30).

for the formal analysis of narrative texts since Stanley Fish inaugurated American reader response criticism. In this essay I wish to get beneath the acknowledged antinomy to the unacknowledged dependence of a certain notion of form on temporality in modern Anglo-American criticism, especially that of the molecular variety. By the dependence of form on temporality, I do not mean simply that the terms are *dialectically* opposed or that form relies on time as the thing it stops or interrupts. I have in mind a more specific intimacy involving the effect of modern perceptions of time on conceptions of form. The formalism that has been most crucial to the development of our profession in America is adamant in its conviction that literature cannot stop time; indeed, it has sometimes juxtaposed itself to the structural variety of formalism on precisely the grounds that molar analyses falsify “the representation of experience in its temporality.”<sup>6</sup> Contending against the likes of Aristotle, the advocates of temporality have presented literary form not as a *refuge* against time but as a *refugee* from it, a thing startled and driven before time’s onslaught. Hence the kind of attention that has been paid to temporality has further ensured a disregard, if not an outright abhorrence, of length. Often under the very banner of temporal consciousness, ours has become a formalism not of durability but of ephemerality.

I begin my history of this formalism with a quotation from Shelley’s *Defense of Poetry*, in which the usual distinction between temporal sequence and unchangeable form is articulated as a contrast between kinds of writing:<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Paul H. Fry, *The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 4. Fry begins with the assumption that all formalism is structural, consisting in the conversion of time into space, and consequently he interprets what I will call the “formalism of ephemerality” as a rebellion against formalism rather than the practice of an alternative kind. Deconstructionists, too, have preferred to think of their method as an antiformalism.

<sup>7</sup> Fry puts Shelley in a genealogy of critics who stress temporality, and therefore the sublime, as opposed to static spatialized form. Susan J. Wolfson, however, notes the many ways in which Shelley conceives of form throughout his oeuvre and argues that his utopian desire to break forms is really a different kind of formalism (*Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997], chaps. 1, 7). Since mine is only a brief reading of the *Defense*, it is far more modest than Fry’s or Wolfson’s, but it shares their perceptions of Shelley’s radical temporality.

There is this distinction between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other [the poem] is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one [story] is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other [poem] is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature.<sup>8</sup>

Organized here under the contrasting heads of story and poem (which echo Aristotle's terms *history* and *poetry*), Shelley gives us a series of oppositions: story is catalog, whereas poem is creation; story is detached facts, whereas poem is (integrated) actions; story is a lack of any but accidental organization ("no other connexion than time, place," etc.), whereas poem is organization according to the unchangeable *forms* of human nature. Story, the genre that must rely on particulars of time and place for what little organization it has, never quite achieves *form*, which would subdue such ephemera. Hence story, for Shelley, is not a form that fails to be philosophical or serious (as the form "history" falls short of "poetry" in Aristotle's hierarchy); rather, story, by succumbing to time and its attendant specifics, fails to be a form at all.

Distinguishing between kinds of writing not according to their different forms but according to their unequal abilities *to be formal* was an important step toward the literary formalism with which we are familiar. For formalism in literary studies over the last two centuries has usually required the valuation of form as such and has often claimed that striving for form is the distinguishing mark of the literary. If every kind of discourse had a form appropriate to itself, there would be no point

<sup>8</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 485. Several critics have written about this passage as an assertion of the claims of poetry over those of the novel. E.g., Jay Clayton uses the passage to demonstrate the common assumption of poetry's superiority to the novel in this period (*Romantic Vision and the Novel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 12); and Steven Goldsmith discusses the gender implications of the passage, noting that the novel, identified at the time as a women's genre, is here linked to the accidents of matter as opposed to the essence of mind (*Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993], 297-9).

in establishing formal ambition per se as a normative, or value-bearing, feature in itself. To make some kinds of writing more formal than others, Shelley takes an Aristotelian sense of form as genre or kind—that is, form as a mode of differentiating between types of writing—and moves it toward the Platonic notion of form as a transcendent Idea, with a capital *I*. No matter how perfect a thing of its kind a story (or history) may be, its generic constraints, which bind it to time, must keep it from aiming at “the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.” It would seem, then, that the superior formality of poetry consists in its intention to represent forms that are themselves absolutely stable and outside time.

The relation between these Platonic forms and the form taken by the poetry that strives to represent them is not at all clear in Shelley’s essay; indeed, Shelley eschews positive formal descriptions of poetry. Neither the overall shape of a poem nor its style, to mention again the two sorts of formal description encountered in narratological analyses, is found in *A Defense of Poetry*. Verse, for example, is not necessary. Form, in this essay, is not so much a quality of poetry as of its object of representation, human nature, and human nature, we are told, has form to the extent that it is relieved of its time-bound immersion in history.

Those few aspects of poetry to which Shelley briefly alludes above reinforce the idea that its essence is simply the representation of timelessness. Taking his cue from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Shelley tells us that poetry originates not in the world but in the mind; it is not a “catalogue” of observed facts but a “creation.” In short, it is what we now loosely call fictional or mythical. Second, it represents imagined “actions” as opposed to “facts”; once again drawing on Aristotle, Shelley proposes that “action” indicates “unity.” No matter how unified, however, action would also seem temporally extensive. Indeed, Aristotle’s idea of unity of action distinguishes among kinds of temporality: poetry is shaped by a plot rather than by a mere story, and plots are ordered by necessary and probable cause-and-effect logic rather than by mere temporal sequence.<sup>9</sup> Shelley, though, does not make this distinction. In his desire for timelessness, he excludes even cause-and-effect plotting from the domain of poetry, so that the action to which

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, chap. 10.

he refers seems to have no duration or series of parts; it is instead irreducibly whole and instantaneous.<sup>10</sup>

But Shelley's stringent atemporality soon results in a paradox: form, which seems at first to oppose time by being eternal, is best captured, we learn, by a textual instant, which opposes time by being brief. His intention may be to steal attributes from Christianity's God and reinvest them in the idea of form, so that poetry might henceforth handle the transcendent and spiritual side of things. Indeed, Shelley goes on to paraphrase the Christian idea of God's relation to time: "Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts . . . augments that of poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains" (485). But the ontological disjunction between formal humanity and its secular manifestations ensures that form will only fleetingly appear in time. Poetry, we are famously told in the *Defense*, records "the best and happiest *moments* of the happiest and best minds." "We are aware [it continues] of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling . . . always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden. . . . its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it" (504; emphasis mine). The eternal takes a form so fleeting that it hardly appears at all, except in the act of disappearing. The unending is not figured in the sand that "paves" the ceaseless movement of the sea but is instead imagined as the submerged and effaced mark in the sand of a passing air current over the waters. The figure indicates an event so brief that it seems almost to participate in a negative temporality, to be over before it has begun; by the time the wrinkle has formed at the bottom of the water, the wind on its surface has ceased to be.

Referencing the eternal and unchanging through the short-lived, the emphatically transient, or the temporally retrogressive was a common Romantic trope with, ironically, an enduring legacy. Indeed, Baudelaire defined genuinely modern art as the attempt "to distil the eternal from the transitory."<sup>11</sup> The legacy consists not only in the fact

<sup>10</sup> M. H. Abrams says that Shelley writes as if actual poems were "simultaneous and inter-convertible" (*The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1953], 128).

<sup>11</sup> "The Painter of Modern Life," in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. and trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1992), 402.



that brevity has been the soul of form for the last two centuries but also in an Anglo-American preference for finding form in the detached, and often atypical, stylistic details of a literary composition rather than in its structure conceived as an ordered series of differentiated parts. Of the two formalisms with which I began, in other words, the second, which often presents itself as an antiformalism, has the more prestigious pedigree. Listen, for example, to the enthusiasm with which Shelley finds poetry in smaller and smaller parts of a "composition": "The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole, though it be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portion; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought" (485-6).<sup>12</sup> Instead of sustaining the whole, Shelley's "form" is clearly fugitive from it, and as it flees toward some veiled "order" abiding elsewhere, it tears the completeness of the composition it leaves behind.

Thus Shelley reproduces Coleridge's distinction between "poetry" and "the poem" and revises it for future generations. We can, for example, trace the tendency to disregard the shape of actual works and to equate form instead with extractable textual moments through Arnold's touchstones, the isolated purity of Ruskin's "gems," Pater's "fining down" of form into a moment of making and unmaking, and on into its modernist manifestations in the criticism of I. A. Richards, William Empson, and the American New Critics. I will soon turn to three of Shelley's legatees, Walter Pater, John Crowe Ransom, and Virginia Woolf, for examples of how the formalism of brevity operates once Shelley's transcendental trappings have been shed.

<sup>12</sup> In defending Shelley against charges of inconsistency, Earl R. Wasserman explains that the emphasis on the "sporadic" and "intermittent" is a necessary supplement to an aesthetics of organic wholeness of the sort he has attributed to the *Defense*: "If the essential criterion of a work of art is its organic wholeness, the evident facts are that systematic poetics cannot account for our desire to experience and create organic wholeness and that although we find one work of art greater than another, poetics alone cannot account for the difference" (*Shelley: A Critical Reading* [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971], 213). Hence the random, momentary visitations of inspiration, Wasserman argues, are Shelley's way of providing for such qualitative distinctions among poems, which are inaccessible to analyses that focus on the relation of parts to wholes. Wasserman seems not to notice that the intermittent is often at odds with "organic wholeness" or that he has seriously called his own criterion of organicism into question by this admission.

First, however, I want to emphasize that even Shelley's Neoplatonism makes literary form dependent not on time's absence or suspension but on its unyielding pressure. So far we have seen that Shelley attaches literary forms of timelessness not to what is always there but to what is only briefly there, to the fleeting rather than the lasting, the instantaneous rather than the enduring. If the unchanging form of human nature seems to reside above time, its literary figures try to dart beneath it, like Stealth aircraft below temporality's radar. Or, we might say, literary form attempts to evade time by outpacing it, by evanescing at a rate equal to or greater than time's flux. Although Shelley may intend the ephemeral to be a trope of the eternal, it also figures what drives it: the perpetual movement of time.

In *A Defense of Poetry* the paradox of literary form becomes overt in a metaphor that caps the list of contrasts between stories and poems. "Epitomes," Shelley writes, "have been called the moths of just history," for "they eat out the poetry of it" (485). The ostensible sense of this odd figure seems to be that, just as the caterpillar feeds on a textile (or, for that matter, a text) and uses its sustenance to transform itself into a flying moth, so "epitomes" *digest* the choicest bits of history and then rise above the rest of the tedious story as lighter, airier, more poetic creations. The moth is supposed to symbolize literary form's escape from the monotonous weave of history, but the incongruity between the tenor and the vehicle is glaringly obvious, for several reasons.

First, the metaphor is taken from Bacon's eulogy to history in *Of the Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, where the moth figures the *destructive* effects of epitomes, that is, abstracts and synopses, on full-length histories. Everything about the image speaks of decay: "As for epitomes (which are certainly the corruptions and moths of histories) I would have them banished, whereto likewise most men of sound judgment agree, as being things that have fretted and corroded the bodies of many most excellent histories, and wrought them into base and unprofitable dregs."<sup>13</sup> The epitomizing moth in Bacon's passage implies a pun on the concept of "digesting" (in the sense of creating a digest of) a lengthy work, and it certainly does not hint at the poetic

<sup>13</sup> *Of the Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, vol. 4 of *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London: Longmans, 1883), 304.

transcendence Shelley tries to wrest from it. Instead Bacon's moth merely does time's bidding, eating and eroding what has been previously salvaged from time as a shapely history. In Bacon the moth is time's minion.

Second, what could seem more transitory than the moth itself, which is not only an agent of decay but also a common figure for self-immolation and ephemerality, for the shortness of life and its vanity? Granted, Shelley is purposely reversing Bacon's valuation of the dignity of the genre of history and, in a minor apocalyptic key, extolling its end, so that Bacon's "banished" moth rises an oracle. Still, we must notice the bizarreness of this apocalyptic vehicle. For of all the winged things that take flight at the end of history—Minerva's owl, for example, or the angels in the Book of Revelation—Shelley's poetic moth would seem the least likely to get out alive.<sup>14</sup> It is a strikingly bathetic little image, grotesque and homely, in which the end of time, of History with a capital *H*, becomes the ruination of written histories as material texts, and the symbol of transcendent form becomes a flying insect emerging from a book-eating pupa with a bellyful of poetry. How far could it possibly ascend? Surely, the tiny span of the moth's allotted time, like the futility of its desires, goes without saying.

Third, Shelley himself invokes these connotations in *Epipsychidion* to describe the vanity of his yearning after ideal forms and his own consequent, imminent extinction (ll. 217–24). *Epipsychidion's* moth underscores the futility that the metaphor already hints at in *A Defense of Poetry*, making it clearer that eternity and time are not really distinguishable in their relation to literary form. The eternity that attracts and mobilizes the poetic moth, that sets its short-lived form flitting, also makes it a byword for time's transmutations as well as for death.

<sup>14</sup>A great deal has been written about the apocalyptic impulse in Shelley's poetics. See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971); Ross Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964); J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, by Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Seabury, 1979); and Goldsmith (n. 8 above). My own analysis is indebted to all of these but differs from them by stressing that, regardless of its own transcendentalism and longing to escape language, Shelley's apocalyptic urge spawns a formalism of ephemerality that is easily adapted to nontranscendent purposes. Moreover, far from wanting to obliterate language, as Miller's Shelley does, this formalism readily accommodates an endlessly deferred apocalypse of a specifically linguistic kind.

Half a century after Shelley's death Walter Pater seems to have arrived at the same idea of the ephemerality of form by explicitly renouncing the transcendental longings that agitated Shelley's moth. Self-consciously opposing himself to the Neoplatonism espoused by the earlier poet, Pater took Heraclitus as his preferred ancient familiar and cultivated a poignant satisfaction in the instability of all things. He begins and ends his study of the Renaissance with now canonical statements of what appears to be a thoroughly secular, time-embracing formalism. Form, we are told, is immanent in human life, *life* being the god-term of nineteenth-century secularism. No separate, permanent forms exist, and the impermanence of a formal configuration accounts for its pathos and attractiveness: "Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face . . . for that moment only."<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps to avoid giving the impression that a formal principle resides outside time, Pater uses the word *form* sparingly; he prefers to speak of what Baudelaire and Sainte-Beuve called the "formula" that expresses a particular "virtue,"<sup>16</sup> and the first paragraph of *The Renaissance* insists on the immanence and specificity of formulas: "To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics" (xix). The virtues and their formulas alter from one historical period to another, and each expresses the unique genius of a particular maker. Pater's formalism—or perhaps we should call it "formula-ism"—would therefore seem to be historical rather than, like Shelley's, mythic.

For Pater, moreover, the perceiving critic also lives completely in time; indeed, perception and time's passage are almost indistinguishable in his rhetoric. He opens *The Renaissance* with an "impressionist" manifesto designed to eschew time-transcending abstraction. The proper object of aesthetics, he asserts, is the study of the impression made on the individual critic by the individual work of art: "He who experiences these impressions strongly, and drives directly at the dis-

<sup>15</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 188.

<sup>16</sup> Hill points out the similarities between Baudelaire's and Sainte-Beuve's uses of *formula* and Pater's (*Renaissance*, 295).

crimination and analysis of them, has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question of what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience—metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere” (xx).

Yet, for all its explicit historical and material immanence, Pater’s formula-ism, like Shelley’s formalism, pulls apart the lengthy work and divides duration from aesthetics. The very injunction to discriminate and analyze the formula of each work often yields a result remarkably like that achieved by Shelley’s text-eating moth. For example, Pater claims that, instead of pervading his verse, Wordsworth’s formula is “scattered up and down,” having “crystallized a part, but only a part,” of his writing. The critic should identify the bit of verse where the formula has gelled, “as if at random, depositing a fine crystal here or there,” and then “disengage it” from “that great mass of verse [wherein] there is much which might well be forgotten” (xxi–xxii). In Pater’s view, it is the critic, rather than the poetic moth, who lifts the essential, formula-bearing moments out of the tedium of the long work, but both leave the “mass” behind, in Bacon’s words, like “base and unprofitable dregs.”

In fact, Pater’s secular formula-ism, starting from the evidence of mutability, at first glance seems better suited than Shelley’s formalism to the aesthetics of brevity. Since Pater frequently rhapsodizes over the momentariness of all existence, the instantaneousness of the poetic effect, even its retroactive temporality, would seem continuous with the universe of flux: “Those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is” (188). Pater affirms no eternal order glimpsed through the instant, insisting instead that all is temporal instability.

However, it soon becomes apparent that Pater also shares Shelley’s hope that attention to literary form might at least cheat time. He explains that some of the constantly dissolving impressions are more acute than others as they pass, and these “single sharp” impressions jut out from the undifferentiated stream of blunter perceptions. They are

like the crystals amid the great mass of Wordsworth's forgettable verse. Getting from one such intense moment to another with the greatest celerity becomes the task of the aesthetic life: "How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?" (188). Although the effort to live at the high points ("always"), to sustain a perpetual present of superlatives ("greatest," "purest"), is driven by a hyperconsciousness of ephemerality, it would nevertheless transcend time by passing over the low stretches between the peaks. Pater's most famous formulation of aestheticism—"To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life"—recommends achieving the psychological *effect* of timelessness ("be[ing] present always") in a permanent state of feverish aesthetic apprehension. One thereby reaches the illusion of stasis by joining the race of fleeting instants, as Blake indicated long before in his poem "Eternity":

He who bends to himself a Joy  
Does the winged life destroy;  
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies  
Lives in Eternity's Sunrise.

Pater's assertion that there is nothing outside time easily incorporates the formalistic valuation of the briefest possible objects of literary analysis, and it encourages the notion that poetic form is maintained by racing ahead of time. Just as one should get through life by leaping from one high point to the next, one should get through, for example, Wordsworth by hopping from one formula-transmuted crystal to the next. Skipping the ordinary is crucial.

Like Blake's cheerfully affirmative quatrain, though, Pater's formula for avoiding mere duration seems artificially bright and complacent compared to Shelley's apocalyptic vision. By blithely accepting momentariness and change as the deepest reality, Pater temporarily holds the darker implications of the formalism of ephemerality at a distance. His unrelenting secularism, with its stress on success in *life*, often hides what is always implicit in Shelley's moth metaphor: the shadow of death. Even the implied analogy with gem collecting makes the aesthete's labor seem clean, durable, sterile, and safe compared to that of the poetry-garnering moth. If we compare the crystal and the moth as figures for poetry, the former, created by "the heat of genius"

(xxi), has the clear advantage of invulnerability: the crystal has already come out of the fire that the moth will not survive. Even the faint apocalyptic echo that resonates from the crystal to the “crystal-clear jasper” walls (Rev. 21.11) of the New Jerusalem evokes the everlasting city that follows the annihilation. Pater’s image of sprinting across a series of bright peaks, moreover, strengthens the suggestion that a vigilant quest for the crystalline may obviate our ever having to walk through the shadowy valley where mortality lurks. At least in his most quoted epigram, he arrives at a formula for actually inhabiting, albeit on a sort of aesthetic treadmill, those moments that Shelley thought the mere shadows of a reality beyond sensual life. Pater’s Heraclitean fire under wraps, the “hard, gem-like flame” burning perpetually in its crystalline case, immolates no moths.

Paradoxically, then, Pater’s secular ideal of “success in life” yields images of form’s inorganic hardness and brightness, whereas Shelley’s transcendental ideal produces images of organic fragility. By deferring the achievement of formal perfection to a separate ontological plain, Shelley’s formalism seems to press toward mortality, whereas Pater tries to purge his formalism of otherworldliness and the death drive, to locate it inside a willfully artificial present. However, the pluckiness of Pater’s determination, the almost theatrical resoluteness of his *presentness*, points as well to the jaws of time yawning in the background, like hell’s mouth in a medieval morality play. Indeed, the poignancy and power of his aestheticism depend on frequent reminders that he poses at the edge an abyss: “With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about what we see and touch” (189); or, “We have but an interval, and then our place knows us no more. . . . our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (190). Thus fomenting a continuous awareness of death’s imminence, Pater’s idea of ecstatic presence is preconceived as unattainable. One is occupied not so much by the *present* as by the “desperate” *attempt to be present*—fully and only—for all the moments when “some form grows perfect.” Consequently, Pater’s here and now is as hard to come by as Shelley’s indestructible order.

Furthermore, Pater's goal is more cruelly unreachable than Shelley's, for by locating form in time and making life the pursuit of form, Pater implies that lapses in aesthetic athleticism constitute failures not just at art but at *life*. Concentration on the precious moment blights the remainder, which subsides into an abstract, meaningless flow. Heightened life must now bear the whole burden of form, and therefore its nonecstatic intervals become *unsuccessful* life. The unavoidable failure to realize form in time, a *condition of living* for Shelley, becomes a *failure at living* for Pater.

In sum, by the end of the nineteenth century the aesthetics of ephemerality had tried to make form immanent in life, but the result was the formalization of life as the constant race to maintain the impression of standing still, of timelessness.<sup>17</sup> Even Pater recognizes that such a race cannot be won, but the losers no longer have the consolation of being, after all, alive; they must instead view their lapses, which no doubt constitute the majority of their existence, as a falling short of life's potential. Like the great mass of Wordsworth's verse, the great mass of our experience seems dross, a dead thing, destined for a well-deserved oblivion.

Pater's exuberant celebration of ephemerality thus yielded certain melancholy inferences, which were certainly not lost on early-twentieth-century literary critics. Having assumed the primary responsibility for identifying whatever modicum of order was left in the thoroughly secular universe, these formalists stressed the difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of their task. In John Crowe Ransom's "Criticism, Inc.," for example, a poem is no longer the record of the happiest moments of one of the happiest men but instead "a desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre" resulting from the poet's agonized attempt to "perpetuate in his poem an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath his touch."<sup>18</sup> The odds are certainly against the poet, and even more against the critic, who must take the

<sup>17</sup>This dynamic in Pater's work resembles the withdrawal of immanent meaning from experience that Georg Lukács analyzes in both *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel*.

<sup>18</sup>Ransom, "Criticism, Inc.," in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), 238.



fragile poetic object apart to examine its construction; even if “all the finesse possible” has been exercised, the result is at best “a rude and patchy business” (238).

The very futility of poetry and criticism, however, seems to be what makes it all worthwhile. “Ecstasy” would be mere childishness compared to the heroic desperation that Ransom admires. The “order” that is “constantly crumbling” is certainly not Shelley’s “indestructible order,” nor is it even the poet’s characteristic formula; instead it is the object of perception in its pristine, preconceptual particularity. Ransom here echoes a theme heard frequently in aesthetics since its eighteenth-century inception: art preserves the uniqueness of things, saving them from subsumption under categories. Enemies of this uniqueness are, according to Ransom, everywhere: all “practical interests” and “sciences” are out to reduce objects to “their various abstracts.” The poet alone can defend the object, but even his own medium betrays his effort, for language notoriously tends toward the “universal,” by which Ransom means general categories or abstractions. The poet must use language in normal ways, identifying the object “in terms of the universal or commonplace object” but, in doing so, threatening its singular objectness. The abstracting tendency of language itself crumbles the particularity of the object, jeopardizing its status as “real, individual, and qualitatively infinite.” The order the poem tries to safeguard is imperiled from within by its own “prose core” of “denotative language,” “which any forthright prosy reader can discover . . . by means of an immediate paraphrase” (238).<sup>19</sup>

Ransom thus gives the poetic moment, in which the object is apprehended in its unreduced singularity, a new and inescapable enemy; allied to the depredations of time are the corrosions of language’s inevitably categorical tendencies. As in Pater, the order one wishes to save is always momentary, and hence time, its element, is also its enemy. That much is familiar. But in Ransom, temporal atomism threatens a kind of nominalism, in which linguistic universals are cast

<sup>19</sup>Not all contemporary critics accepted this definition of poetry. The Chicago school vigorously objected to the New Critical description of poetry’s formal essence simply as its deviation from prose norms and of the consequent disappearance of interest both in the relation of differentiated parts to wholes and in the various genres of literature. See, e.g., R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 80–139.

as falsifying abstractions that obscure the real particulars, which alone are “qualitatively infinite.”<sup>20</sup> Once again, infinity is in the details, but the poet’s “desperate ontological” struggle to keep it there has become a struggle against his own medium. Instead of fixing moments, language generally disintegrates them, diminishing aesthetic instants to mere instances of abstractions. Faced with the treachery of his own medium, what is the poet to do?

Ransom tells us that the poet must encase the internal enemy, the “prose core” or paraphrasable meaning of the poem, in “a tissue of irrelevance,” which violates prose logic. Just as the prose core of the original object begins to “emerge” from the language-shattered edifice of particularity, it must be precariously arrested by a poetic tissue of “superfluity” and irrelevance. The poet thus uses a language of connotation, peculiarly indirect and metaphorical, to repair the damage done by his language of denotation. Thus detained in “a tissue of irrelevance from which it does not really emerge,” the immobilized prose core is not transformed into crystal, as in Pater, but is locked, permanently twitching, in a state of tension with the poem’s own linguistic superfluity (238). With normal language now acting as time’s culprit, all that can be salvaged of order is a language bent from its natural, abstracting inclinations, twisted to betray time’s confidence. Only the little, irrelevant bits can be counted on to work partial linguistic self-subversions. It is this tension that confers on the poem the status of particular objectness; no longer a representation but a thing in itself, it differs, of course, from the original object of perception, but it recalls that former particular by possessing its own, ever threatened and fragile, uniqueness.

Ransom’s account of poetry is more explicitly paradoxical and lugubrious than either Shelley’s or Pater’s. Although poetry still promises to arrest something that is passing out of existence, its failure at this task is clear from the outset; indeed, the poem is a record of failure, since it exists only as a compensatory substitute for the object. The poet actually preserves only the record of a standoff between prose

<sup>20</sup> William R. Everdell argues that a new “atomism” is the distinguishing feature of early-twentieth-century modernism in both the arts and the sciences (*The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997]).

and poetry. All the poem can arrest is the prose object, the diminished product of the crumbling effected by the abstracting and reductive force of ordinary language, in its tense relation to the cocoon of poetry that surrounds it. Ransom seems in this image to have inverted Shelley, hinting at a moth of prose that threatens to emerge from a chrysalis of poetry; poetry has the “residuary quality” (238) that Shelley reserved for prose: it is fragile and discontinuous. The sense that the poem participates in the wreck of the object also intensifies the sense of futility detected in Pater. Ransom’s poets have “techniques” for “involving” the prose core in filaments of irrelevance, an unlovely image compared to Pater’s depiction of the poet transmuting perceptions into glittering crystals by means of an alchemical formula. Ransom’s poet wounds things almost to death by writing about them in the first place and then saves their half-lives by wrapping them in “residuary” poetic “tissue.” The job of the critic, moreover, resembles that of the vivisectionist: no Paterian ecstasy for him, no leaping about from peak to peak of intense perception; he must instead unwrap the chrysalis constructed by the poet and define its characteristic technical devices, all the while fearing that the prose core might take flight and be mistaken for the poem itself.

Ransom’s gloominess is appropriate to the temporality implied in his essay. If Shelley’s formalism anticipates death and Pater’s tries to avoid it, Ransom’s mourns it. His well-wrought poem is a funeral urn enclosing the ashes of the object that can no longer be perceived. For Shelley, poetry suggests forms that might be encountered in the *future*; for Pater, it strives to render momentary forms *present* as they fly; but for Ransom, it commemorates the preconceptual order of the *past* object, which stimulates writing but ceases to be as the poem comes into existence. Each formalism, then, has a different temporal orientation toward a putatively external form, but Ransom’s consciousness of the belatedness of poetry defines literary form as necessarily elegiac.

This strong sense of belatedness also encourages the explicit investigation of literary form’s residual, or supplementary, nature. And this investigation, arguably the central preoccupation of Anglo-American literary criticism, finds new ways of articulating the old opposition between formal, literary moments and sequence. Because the poem tries to imitate a particularity now dissolved, using the very medium of its disintegration, its own language must violate linguistic norms by

“deviating” from both logic and chronology, by refusing to take its place in any linear sequence, resisting integration in an analytic or narrative order. Little knots of impacted, concentrated, dense language; paradoxes, ambiguities, and indeterminacies; self-reference and repetition—all the language that seems to cross back and forth over itself and consequently to thwart forward movement—come to epitomize the literary. Moreover, since they are a thickening of *language* that retards linear progress, the deviations are formal in yet another sense: they not only imitate the order that time perpetually crumbles but also produce an obtrusive excess of the medium, leading to the commonplace modernist perception that art refers to its own formal properties. In short, the formalism of brevity, forever proffering new temporalities of the moment, belongs right at the heart of our profession.

The idea of form as the momentary refusal of sequential integration is central as well to the early-twentieth-century narrative experiments in the modernist novel. The force of the paradox that I have been discussing—that form is conceived as fleeting, exceptional, and interruptive of the literary work—is intensified when the narrative exigencies of the novel meet the disruptive temporality of modernist momentariness.<sup>21</sup> The instants that novelists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf marked as sudden accessions of aesthetic illumination—in tropes such as epiphany, syncope, fragmentation, discontinuity, and rupture—are recognizable only against a background of statelier narrative advancement.<sup>22</sup> They require, in other words, surrounding continuous succession, some lengthiness, and yet they are emphatically opposed to it, as instances of a temporality so radical that they escape sequence. Always resisting narrative incorporation, moments associated with aesthetic form inhabit the genre of the modernist novel like parasites.

Which brings us back to moths and my final example of the for-

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of techniques of simultaneity in French modernism see Roger Shattuck, “The Art of Stillness,” in *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant Garde in France, 1885 to World War I*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1968), 325–52.

<sup>22</sup> For a full discussion of the tropes of suddenness and their use in Romanticist and modernist texts see Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. Ruth Crowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). See also Marshall Brown’s discussion of Romantic epiphany as “discontinuous continuity” in *Turning Points: Essays in the History of Cultural Expressions* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 173–94.

malism of ephemerality. I might have finished with Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, noting its explicit references to Shelley and its connection between epiphanic moments and the winged creature, Daedalus, who self-destructively flies toward the flaming sun, but I have chosen instead to light on a more modest apocalyptic being. Woolf's "Death of the Moth" is obviously not a novel but a narrative essay of only a few pages, and yet it has the novelistic "chronotope," to use Bakhtin's term, of daily life, and so I will indulge (as I have done throughout my essay) a formalist bias toward brevity and use this tiny essay to make some closing comments about the *narrative* use of ephemeral formal moments.

Much is familiar about Woolf's moth: it is a symbol of life's brevity and consequent pathos, a reminder that living beings are always on the threshold of death. Hence Woolf at first juxtaposes the insect's existence against the vastness of life's possibilities. Initially, its "meagre," highly schematic mode of being, as it flutters inside a window-pane, seems a pathetic abbreviation: "He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the downs, the width of the sky, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea."<sup>23</sup> But gradually the moth becomes emblematic of all that vast life as its miniature stature yields what we might recognize as its formal potential:

Because he was so small, and so simple a form of the energy that was rolling in at the open window and driving its way through so many narrow and intricate corridors in my own brain and in those of other human beings, there was something marvelous as well as pathetic about him. It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zigzagging to show us the true nature of life. Thus displayed, one could not get over the strangeness of it. (10)

As an insignificant life form, a being barely there, the moth becomes *the* form of life—a "vitaleme," to coin a term: "He was little or nothing

<sup>23</sup> Woolf, "The Death of the Moth," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1942), 9.

but life" (10). The moth reveals the form of life to be energy, that which animates matter but is nevertheless its opposite: "One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity" (10). But confronted in its briefest, simplest form, life's "true nature" stands revealed as the enigmatic dependence of energy on the very matter that covers it and weighs it down.

Thus far the story seems to demonstrate how easily modernist narrative accommodates the formal moment. The narrator's random momentary attention to a thoroughly vulgar insect modulates into the perception of an avatar, a creature incarnating life itself. Indeed, thus far there is something pat about the progression, indicating a desire to tame apocalyptic associations and avoid rupture. Woolf's opening sentences seem to announce that desire, immediately informing us that "the present specimen" (9) is not the exciting kind of "somber" moth, like Shelley's, that flies by night but only a hay-colored daytime moth, insensible to the heavenly flame.

The story, however, does not end with the momentary revelation of life's enigmatic nature; it moves on to a proper epiphany, expressed in the fitting rhetoric of suddenness. The narrator reports that "it *flashed upon me* that [the moth] was in difficulties"; "it *came over me* that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death" (10). But it is a rupture that insists on the continuity of the quotidian, occurring not in the mysterious twilight but in the ordinary light of midday. Indeed, the continuity of the daylight is the key to its significance, for when the narrator looks for "the enemy against which [the moth] struggled," she clearly sees that there is nothing to see, only "stillness and quiet." Her epiphany is a noiseless apocalypse of the imagination, in which the very formalism of the moth, his previous transfiguration into a minimalist symbol of life, suddenly becomes a hollow space through which nothingness makes its appearance; for, in its full vigor, the moth was "*nothing* but life," and when its vitality begins to fail, its nothingness remains as a memento mori. The moth as a cipher for Life earlier seemed an incarnation, a first coming, a moment of plenitude and fulfillment. But *as a cipher* it opens the door to the Second Coming in all of its apocalyptic associations: "One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which

could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death" (11). What was before the "rolling" life force is now, suddenly, a tidal wave of destruction, against which "nothing" has a chance.

Of course, it is literally nothing that has a chance against death: the nothingness of the interval in the trope of suddenness, the nothingness of the figurative moth, the nothingness of allegorical figuration generally ("nothing but life"), and, by extension, the nothingness of the formal, epiphanic moment, with its self-consciousness about ciphering. Hence such moments, whenever they occur in modernist narratives, tend to signal "the end." In their apparent finality, their summary break with, as well as their exposure of, the writing that goes before and comes after, they appear to be both the opposite and the essence of the surrounding work.

This feature of modernist narrative, in conjunction with the New Criticism that was invented to appreciate it, both capped a long tradition of Anglo-American formalism and prepared the American reception of Russian formalism, with its concentration on moments of defamiliarization, as well as deconstruction. Shklovsky's argument that the essence of novelistic discourse lies in the suspension and estrangement of narrative conventions resonates harmoniously with our already traditional predilection for moments of self-reflexivity. Given the history that I have just outlined, it is obvious why American critics found it easy to assimilate and repeat the deconstructionist insight that a formal moment in a literary work is an aporia, and vice versa. Even the structuralists, whose idea of form requires a more sustained examination of temporal sequence, nevertheless appealed to a long-established preference for the synchronic over the diachronic. Claude Lévi-Strauss may never have read Shelley, but we may nevertheless hear the echoes of the Romantic poet's formalism when the author of *The Savage Mind* explains that history is intelligible only by dint of the operation of a code, which is itself synchronic and "operates by means of a rectangular matrix."<sup>24</sup>

There is, however, yet another lesson to be learned from the *narrative* employment of formalist moments. Modernist stories generally

<sup>24</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 260.

recover from such moments, using what we might call techniques of ongoingness: irony, bathos, banality. Dedalus gets a cold bath; Clarissa Dalloway rejoins the party; the moth states an obvious triviality: “Death is stronger than I am” (11). The narratives’ return to the chronotope of the mundane, to sequence, to plot, certainly emphasizes the tension between the linear-temporal narrative genre and the atemporal self-reflective formal moments, but it should also underscore the partialness and inadequacy of stop-action formal analyses. If we are ever to develop a concept of length that includes analytic insights into the temporal nature of narrative, we will have to be a little less mothlike ourselves, a little less enamored of the end.