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Reading Ideas in Victorian Literature

Literary Content as Artistic Experience

Patrick Fessenbecker

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‘Victorian’ is a term, at once indicative of a strongly determined concept and an often notoriously vague notion, emptied of all meaningful content by the many journalistic misconceptions that persist about the inhabitants and cultures of the British Isles and Victoria’s Empire in the nineteenth century. As such, it has become a by-word for the assumption of various, often contradictory habits of thought, belief, behaviour and perceptions. Victorian studies and studies in nineteenth-century literature and culture have, from their institutional inception, questioned narrowness of presumption, pushed at the limits of the nominal definition, and have sought to question the very grounds on which the unreflective perception of the so-called Victorian has been built; and so they continue to do. Victorian and nineteenth-century studies of literature and culture maintain a breadth and diversity of interest, of focus and inquiry, in an interrogative and intellectually open-minded and challenging manner, which are equal to the exploration and inquisitiveness of its subjects. Many of the questions asked by scholars and researchers of the innumerable productions of nineteenth-century society actively put into suspension the clichés and stereotypes of ‘Victorianism’, whether the approach has been sustained by historical, scientific, philosophical, empirical, ideological or theoretical concerns; indeed, it would be incorrect to assume that each of these approaches to the idea of the Victorian has been, or has remained, in the main exclusive, sealed off from the interests and engagements of other approaches. A vital interdisciplinarity has been pursued and embraced, for the most part, even as there has been contest and debate amongst Victorianists, pursued with as much fervour as the affirmative exploration between different disciplines and differing epistemologies put to work in the service of reading the nineteenth century.

Edinburgh Critical Studies in Victorian Culture aims to take up both the debates and the inventive approaches and departures from convention that studies in the nineteenth century have witnessed for
the last half century at least. Aiming to maintain a ‘Victorian’ (in the
most positive sense of that motif) spirit of inquiry, the series’ purpose
is to continue and augment the cross-fertilisation of interdisciplin-
ary approaches, and to offer, in addition, a number of timely and
untimely revisions of Victorian literature, culture, history and identity.
At the same time, the series will ask questions concerning what has
been missed or improperly received, misread, or not read at all, in
order to present a multifaceted and heterogeneous kaleidoscope of
representations. Drawing on the most provocative, thoughtful and
original research, the series will seek to prod at the notion of the
‘Victorian’, and in so doing, principally through theoretically and
epistemologically sophisticated close readings of the historicity of
literature and culture in the nineteenth century, to offer the reader
provocative insights into a world that is at once overly familiar,
and irreducibly different, other and strange. Working from original
sources, primary documents and recent interdisciplinary theoretical
models, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Victorian Culture seeks not
simply to push at the boundaries of research in the nineteenth cen-
tury, but also to inaugurate the persistent erasure and provisional,
strategic redrawing of those borders.

Julian Wolfreys
Acknowledgements

Perhaps more so than is usually the case, the origins of this book lie in a single moment. Meeting with me after reading another interminable dissertation chapter, my advisor Amanda Anderson told me, with just a hint of asperity, ‘You can’t treat novels like they just say things!’ Although I had been thinking about the relationship between philosophy and literature for years, Amanda articulated in that moment the real question I was asking: why don’t we treat literary works as if they say things, and what would an interpretive practice and artistic theory based on valuing them for what they said look like? My first thanks go to her for that question, and for supervising the beginnings of this book with patience and rigour; I hope her concerns have been at least to some extent addressed. And I am grateful to everyone who made Johns Hopkins into an enormously rich environment for interdisciplinary work in the humanities. Seminars from Amanda, Sharon Cameron, Yi-Ping Ong and Mark Jenkins introduced me to many of the works and thinkers described in these pages, and I’m grateful too for conversations with my fellow students – Maggie Vinter, Kara Wedekind, Robert Day, Nick Bujak, Doug Tye, Rob Higney and others. Matthew Flaherty and Roger Maioli deserve special mention: I’m humbled by the way they have acknowledged my work in the development of their own thinking and am delighted to be able to return the favour.

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Abbreviations


ID Augusta Webster, In A Day (London: Kegan et al., 1882). Electronic copy made available via the Hathi Trust.


PF Anthony Trollope, Phineas Finn: The Irish Member (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
Abbreviations


Teachers of Literature are apt to think up such problems as ‘What is the author’s purpose?’ or still worse, ‘What is the guy trying to say?’

Vladimir Nabokov

Whatever it may have been in the past, the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.

Susan Sontag

Ideas in poetry are usually stale and false, and no one older than sixteen would find it worth his while to read poetry merely for what it says.

George Boas

Near the end of *Distant Reading*, a collection of his influential essays on literary methodology, Franco Moretti writes that ‘formal analysis is the great accomplishment of literary study’, and that any alternative to it must show that it is somehow superior or at least equal.¹ The claim is presented as if it is more or less obvious; what is necessary in Moretti’s mind is not to justify formalism, but instead to show that his variation on formalism can offer new insights. But that phrase – ‘the great accomplishment’ – should give one pause. Why, exactly, is formalism the most significant achievement of literary criticism, and what conception of literature lies behind this claim?

Caroline Levine’s award-winning book *Forms* shares the same basic sense of the nature of literary criticism. ‘One of the great achievements of formalism’, she tells us, ‘has been the development of rich vocabularies and highly refined skills for differentiating among forms.’² Indeed reading for form is ‘what literary critics have traditionally done
best’. Susan Wolfson, in the book that initiated the ‘New Formalism’, similarly holds up formalism as the element of literary criticism that is worth preserving. She is ‘struck by how tenacious the subject has proven’; quoting Geoffrey Hartman approvingly, she notes how hard – and by hard she means impossible – it is to move beyond formalism. Levine’s version of formalism and her justification for it differs significantly from Moretti’s – and Wolfson’s differs from both – but all three writers share the same basic sense that the greatest thing literary studies has done is to think about form.

The fact that each of these writers explains the value and purpose of literary criticism differently while landing on the same feature of the literary text as the thing worth studying should surprise literary critics more than it does. If a commitment to formalism can and does survive disagreement about most of the other elements of literary texts, this suggests that at least some of the work of Levine, Moretti and the other formalists is ex post facto reasoning: the arguments offered are not the real source of the commitment to formalism, but rather rationalisations given to justify the pre-existing commitment. And as Marjorie Levinson has noted, ‘the shared commitment’ to form without consensus about what it is suggests that what is really going on here is a buried commitment to the aesthetic. The situation thus calls for a genealogy, one that explains where and when the commitment to form in contemporary literary criticism originated, why it was originally adopted and subsequently maintained, and what alternatives it was developed against.

The need for a genealogy is all the more obvious because of how inadequate formalism is as a description of the varieties of reading practice and literary aesthetics. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian have recently and approvingly noted the tendency of criticism to redefine ‘form’ at the beginning of an essay and let the argument flow from there, but I want to ask what ways of reading this model of literary analysis leaves out. By definition, it would seem, formalism will have trouble explaining any attachment a reader might have to the content of a literary work. The unloved and maligned second child of literary history, content has never received the same kind of attention as her big sister form: at best, she can hope only that a writer will dissolve the distinction, and grant content equal status to form on the grounds that ultimately it is impossible to distinguish coherently between the two. Yet surely a primary interest in a text’s content is an ordinary and easily understood kind of reading experience. Readers who come away from Pride and Prejudice with an affection for Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, who leave Ayn Rand with a new set of
thoughts about the individual and property rights (or Upton Sinclair with a different set of thoughts about the same topics), or who leave *Hamlet* thinking that perhaps suicide is a more complicated question than they had realised do not seem crazy or mistaken. How, then, did such an ordinary kind of reading experience become so anathema to the practice of literary criticism, such that ‘reading for the message’ could become a label that critics would hasten to escape? The answer lies in the history of literary theory in the twentieth century, and the commitment through a broad succession of theoretical approaches to an essentially similar account of the nature of the literary text.

This is a book that tries to move beyond that account, that offers a new description of literature and the reading experience, and that offers an alternative to formalism. The commitment to formalism in literary studies is deep and pervasive, and it turns up in all sorts of surprising places: one finds it at the highest level, in the theoretical accounts of the nature of literature and aesthetic experience, and at the lowest level, in the practice of literary criticism and the everyday decisions that critics make about which elements of texts require explanation. Correspondingly, an emphasis on content proves surprisingly difficult to maintain: my account here will move back and forth between engaging overt and reflective defences of formalism and drawing out the unreflective and instinctive formalist gestures in specific pieces of criticism in order to counter both in developing its alternative. The problem is complicated by the fact that content is by its nature messy; although I do my best to define the term in Chapter 1, I don’t see a way to give ‘content’ the simple and straightforward definition that form has received from its many defenders. Correspondingly, I will limit my defence here to intellectual content, to the ideas in texts, and to a related experience of reading that one might call reading-as-thinking or thoughtful reading. Scepticism about this practice is central to the rise of formalism, but it has not disappeared – far from it. I suspect that it cannot disappear, because it is a central part of what readers enjoy about books. But to bring thoughtful reading into the light, it is necessary to understand how it was hidden in the first place.

### What Happened to the Novel of Ideas?
#### The Long Tail of Aestheticism

As with any genealogy, it is not easy to pick a point of origin for formalism in literary criticism. But the end of the nineteenth century in England stands out for several reasons. First, it is in a literal and
institutional sense the origin for a good deal of the discourse of contemporary literary studies. The subsequent work of I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and the first generation of academic literary critics in the universities shows their inheritance of problems in late nineteenth-century aesthetics. And additionally, as Mary McCarthy observed a generation ago, the high realist novel of the period from approximately 1850 to 1890 married intellectual content with all the rest of its elements and effects. It is telling, she argues, that there was not a separate category for the ‘novels of ideas’: all the high realist novels were saturated with ideas, with theoretical observation and analysis.\(^\text{10}\) So the implication of the phrase ‘novels of ideas’ – that some novels might not be novels of ideas, might not have intellectual content, and that thoughtful reading might be a practice applied only to certain books – seemed foreign. By the end of the century, however, that conjunction between intellectual content and other aesthetic effects was coming apart. So if one wants to know what happened to literary content, we can perhaps begin there.

In *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*, Leah Price points out that the practice of extracting propositional knowledge, in the form of aphorisms, was a popular way of understanding George Eliot’s fiction in particular.\(^\text{11}\) Eliot, according to Price, was of two minds about this sort of adulation. On the one hand, Eliot compliments one anthologist’s attentiveness: ‘you know what I mean, and care the most for those elements in my writing which I myself care the most for’.\(^\text{12}\) On the other hand, Eliot had deep reservations about the violations of her narrative form, complaining of readers who ‘cut’ *Daniel Deronda* ‘into scraps [. . .] I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there.’\(^\text{13}\) This implies both an ending and a beginning: just as Eliot gave the novel the moral and theoretical sophistication that Victorian anthologists required, making narrative extraction possible, she also articulated a worry about the importance of narrative form as an aesthetic element – which, properly attended to, made extracting impossible.

Price goes on to contend that the sort of extractable ‘didactic digressions’ characteristic of Eliot became associated in the English fiction of the 1890s ‘with a feminine moralism opposed at once to the narrative pleasure of masculine romance like Stevenson’s or Kipling’s and to the avant-garde doctrine of art for art’s sake’.\(^\text{14}\) Certainly, the link between extractable digressions and moralism is central to Oscar Wilde’s argument for an alternative aesthetics; for Wilde, the rejection of the ethical evaluation of art came part and parcel with a broader rejection of interpretation based on any assessment of a
text’s intellectual content. Wilde stresses at a number of moments his refusal of ethical criteria in aesthetic analysis, perhaps most famously in the claim that ‘there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.’\(^\text{15}\) But this went alongside an insistence that the presence of an extractable message in a work of art did not matter for, and perhaps actively interfered with, its aesthetic quality. As Ernest puts it in ‘The Critic as Artist’, ‘the aesthetic critic rejects those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver’, preferring instead ‘modes as suggest reverie and mood’ that ‘by their imaginative beauty make all interpretation true and no interpretation final’.\(^\text{16}\) For a text to have an extractable content, a ‘message’, was thus to group it with the uninteresting ‘obvious modes of art’.

But there is room here for an important distinction. The worry about extraction represents at least three versions of a claim in aesthetics. First, as Eliot’s reservations suggest, it is simply a worry about dismissing narrative complexity. Second, as Wilde’s reservations suggest, it is a worry about a reliance on moralistic evaluation and the tendency to reduce the analysis of a text’s content to moral approval or disapproval. But third, it is a worry about the independence of aesthetic criteria and the distinctiveness of art as such; as Price notes, one of Eliot’s reviewers asserted that ‘a novel ceases to be a novel when it aims at philosophical teaching. It is not the vehicle for conveying knowledge. Its business is to amuse.’\(^\text{17}\)

Now, this represents an importantly different worry than those about complexity and moralism: it instead objects to the notion that literary narratives make assertions worthy of genuine consideration. In the process of ensuring that the critic did not extract pieces of narratives unjustifi ably or treat narratives moralistically, a powerful strain of literary criticism over the course of the next two generations – one that culminated in the New Criticism – came widely to adopt what philosophers of art call anti-cognitivism, or the claim that literary texts do not make knowledge claims, and thus accepted the validity of the third objection.\(^\text{18}\) What I want to suggest is that there was a missed opportunity here, insofar as a style of interpretation that avoided unsophisticated extraction and condemnatory moralism but allowed for the possibility that literature could convey sophisticated ideas was eliminated almost by accident.

Henry James’s work on the theory of the novel is a central step in this process, developed in part as a criticism of Eliot. As he writes in ‘Daniel Deronda: A Conversation’, ‘What can be drearier than a novel where the function of the hero […] is to give didactic advice?’\(^\text{19}\) The
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problem, James notes, is that such didacticism disrupts the ‘current’ of the story and renders it into a series of fragments. The idea here, which emphasises the importance of aesthetic coherence, would form a central part of The Art of Fiction, where James writes: ‘the idea, the starting-point, of the novel’ is the only feature that can be thought of as ‘something different from its organic whole [...] in proportion as the work is successful, the idea permeates and penetrates it, informs and animates it, so that every word and every punctuation-point contribute directly to the expression’. James thus emphasises the necessity of a singular coherence for the ‘organic whole’ of the aesthetic object. And what the Jamesian novelist does is attempt to render every element of the story in harmony with that ‘idea’, so that it ‘permeates and penetrates’ all the parts of the novel in such a way that everything contributes to the idea’s expression. James has in mind something very much like aesthetic unity – the creation of a clear pattern that governs the elements in the novel. And crucially, it is attending to and explaining this unity that constitutes proper engagement with a novel on the part of the literary critic.

Other critics developed versions of James’s central insight – most importantly Virginia Woolf, who remarks in an essay on George Meredith that

when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both. Above all, his teaching is too insistent [...] characters in fiction resent [nothing] more. If, they seem to argue, we have been called into existence merely to express Mr. Meredith’s views upon the universe, we would rather not exist at all. Thereupon they die; and a novel that is full of dead characters, even though it is also full of profound wisdom and exalted teaching, is not achieving its aim as a novel.

Woolf expresses here, even more clearly than James, the importance of rendering philosophical ideas as organic parts of the work of fiction: when a message can be ‘cut out’, as the Victorians did with Eliot, there is ‘something wrong with the philosophy or the novel or both’. And we see in the second half of the passage an anticonceptivist theory of narrative emerging. When the novelist allows the expression of her ideas to dominate the structure of the work, the characters – who are thus merely means to express the author’s view – in some fashion ‘die’, and the novel fails ‘as a novel’. Woolf does not quite say that it is inappropriate to read a novel for its
wisdom, or that such wisdom is irrelevant to a work’s virtues, but the impression is nevertheless clear that such things are incidental to the text’s status as literary art.

This is not to say that the movement towards anti-cognitivism was quite complete. For one thing, James himself seemed to acknowledge that literature might have epistemological virtues. This is part of his critique of Anthony Trollope: noting Trollope’s claim that he was only engaged in ‘make believe’, James remarks that this is a ‘betrayal of a sacred office’, insofar as ‘it implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth [. . .] than the historian’.25 Even if James thinks the ideas within a novel can only be properly understood in relation to each other and as part of an overall structure, there is no reason to think that this structure – once understood – will be cognitively empty. The ‘sacred office’ of the Jamesian novelist, in fact, is to ensure that the novel will not be empty in this way.

But the movement towards anti-cognitivism would eventually triumph in the Anglo-American academy. In *The Craft of Fiction*, his 1921 interpretation of James’s prefaces, Percy Lubbock developed a version of the Jamesian account that was much more hostile to a notion of the novel as a vehicle for propositional content. Lubbock famously distinguishes between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’; in his words, ‘the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself’.26 Now, as Dorothy Hale has suggested, this is still not quite incompatible with a cognitivist theory – in her gloss, ‘when Lubbock insists that the novelist show rather than tell, he only means that the novelist should represent her judgements indirectly rather than expressly’.27 But it is nevertheless eager to prevent the separation of such judgements from the aesthetic experience itself, insofar as ideal novelistic form requires that the author not overtly communicate anything to the reader; in Hale’s gloss, ‘If anyone is to speak for himself in the Lubbockian novel, it must be a character, whose partiality is subordinated to the objective and coherent whole of the “piece”.’28

The world of the work of art is separate from the real world and the world of the reader, and characters and authors must not abrogate the gap between them, for doing so betrays the artistic nature of the text. Put more casually, Lubbock requires that the work of art not embody the artist’s ideas too obviously, and that no one communicate them too straightforwardly.

The anti-cognitivist way of thinking about narrative appeared most dramatically in the New Criticism, which scholars generally recognise as a development from the ‘art for art’s sake views’ of the
British aesthetes. In his foundational text *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), Cleanth Brooks argued that it is in terms of ‘structure’ that ‘one must describe poetry’, where this is

a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonising qualifications [...] The unity is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to an algebraic formula. It is a positive unity, not a negative; it represents not a residue, but an achieved harmony.

This is akin to James’s notion about the way a novelist’s ‘idea’ must permeate every element of a novel. For Brooks, interpreting a poem means understanding its ‘harmony’ – the way its various elements, which include but are not limited to its metre, rhyme and other standard poetic devices, cohere in some fashion.

On this view, while a poem might involve some propositional ideas or theoretical content, it is crucially mistaken to think that an understanding of these is an understanding of the poem. Brooks acknowledges that ‘the dimension in which the poems moves is not one which excludes ideas’, but goes on to say that

any proposition asserted in a poem is not to be taken in abstraction but is justified, in terms of the poem, not by virtue of its [...] truth, but [...] in terms of a principle analogous to that of dramatic propriety. Thus, the proposition that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ is given its precise meaning and significance by its relation to the total context of the poem.

This is to say that, while poems certainly do engage in ideas, one cannot treat them as simple expositions of a set of propositions.

The techniques of narrative interpretation that stem from this way of thinking about literature are especially apparent in *Understanding Fiction*, a textbook composed by Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. The opening essay of the book, a ‘Letter to the Teacher’, indicates that it ‘is their first article of faith that the structure of a piece of fiction, in so far as that piece of fiction is successful, must involve a vital and functional relationship between the idea and the other elements in that structure’. In other words, although thematic content matters, it is essentially important primarily insofar as it creates an aesthetic structure. Brooks and Warren allow that it is better when the ideas are profound ones: ‘a piece of fiction must involve an idea of some real significance for mature and thoughtful human beings’. But they stress
that the idea does not matter as an idea: ‘The mere presence in a piece of fiction of an idea which is held to be important [...] does not necessarily indicate anything about the importance of the piece of fiction. One might almost as well commend a piece of fiction for exemplifying good grammar.’34 This passage stresses the secondary and contingent nature of literary cognitive content in the New Critical approach to fiction – no matter how profound, ideas are ultimately only as important a part of literary art as grammar.

One finds the anti-cognitivist impulse equally in the 1942 textbook *Theory of Literature*, by René Wellek and Austin Warren. Writing of psychology in literature, they indicate that even if an author’s portrayal is accurate, ‘we may well raise the question whether such “truth” is an artistic value’.35 Making the formalism clear, they go on to say that ‘psychological truth is an artistic value only if it enhances coherence and complexity’.36 In a section aptly titled ‘Literature and Ideas’, they ask rhetorically, ‘Must we not rather conclude that “philosophical truth” as such has no artistic value just as we argued that psychological or social truth has no artistic value as such?’ and conclude, ‘Poetry of ideas is like other poetry, not to be judged by the value of the material but by its degree of integration and artistic intensity.’37 The idea that intellectual content might contribute to a text’s artistic value, and moreover that one might appreciate the text primarily by engaging with that content, is on this view deeply mistaken; even if present, the only way such elements can matter is insofar as they contribute to the ‘complexity’ of a poem.

As historians of English as a discipline have noted, the New Criticism spread quickly; this way of thinking about literature became the dominant methodology in academic literary criticism by the late 1950s.38 It has had a tumultuous history since; though it would be largely supplanted in literature departments, first by the rise of structuralist and (almost immediately afterwards) post-structuralist thought, and subsequently by the hermeneutics of suspicion and ideology critique, it remains a central touchstone in most critical anthologies. Moreover, the anti-cognitivist impulse would prove durable, to the point that one literary critic could proclaim confidently, ‘Novels and poems – to repeat the trustworthy commonplace – aren’t made out of ideas.’39 And it continues to appear, even in texts that are in some sense predicated on denying it: in *George Eliot’s Intellectual Life*, Avrom Fleishman dismisses the interpreter who claims ‘here is an idea in a novel or poem, and the author must have believed it’ as practising a mere ‘extractive approach’, and champions instead a ‘functional approach’, which examines ‘how an idea works in the course of a novel’.40
preference for aesthetic structure over intellectual content – explained quickly and almost in passing, an instinctive formalism more than anything else – the dominance of the kind of criticism that Woolf alluded to and that Brooks and Warren practised is clear.

What is more, for all the ways in which structuralist and post-structuralist models of literary interpretation resisted the theoretical commitments of New Criticism, they nevertheless largely agreed that literary texts did not make assertions that interpretations might usefully summarise. This was an overt position in the first great rise of structuralist narratology, developed by figures such as Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette. As Todorov explains in his essay ‘Structural Analysis of Narrative’:

[S]tructural analysis coincides (in its basic tenets) with theory, with the poetics of literature. Its object is the literary discourse rather than works of literature, literature that is virtual rather than real. Such analysis seeks no longer to articulate a paraphrase, a rational resume of the concrete work, but to propose a theory of the structure and operation of the literary discourse, to present a spectrum of literary possibilities, in such a manner that the existing works of literature appear as particular instances that have been realised.

This is to say that for the structuralists, the point of literary analysis is not to generate an interpretation of a specific work, but rather to understand the way general linguistic laws function in generating specific texts. As Todorov puts it, the goal is to understand the nature of ‘literary discourse’ generally, and individual works of literature are relevant mainly as ‘particular instances’ or realisations of that discourse.

Similarly, the post-structuralist criticism of narrative, by figures such as Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller, ultimately shared key New Critical assumptions. As Gene Bell-Viada puts it, ‘deconstruction and its kin qualify as latter-day elaborations of the Western tradition of Art for Art’s sake’; such critics see the belief that literature might ‘help us see the truth’ as just the ‘pre-Derridean preserve of naïve readers’. In a brief reflection on literary criticism in the 1980s, Jane Gallop suggested something similar: while ‘those against theory fought hard to defend the heritage of New Criticism’, she remarks, ‘many of those on the other side were practicing, often under the name of deconstruction, a form of close reading of literary texts not in fact so radically different from New Criticism’. She goes on: ‘Looking back now at that period, I would emphasize not
the debate about theory but the close-reading practice appearing on both sides of the divide.45

One way in which the two practices of close reading coincided was their mutual insistence that literary texts did not convey theoretical content. As Derrida explains, to read a literary text as a straightforward expression of ideas would be to engage in ‘transcendent reading’, which he seeks to ‘put in question’.46 To ‘transcend’ in this regard means ‘going beyond interest for the signifier, the form, the language [. . .] in the direction of the meaning or referent’; as an alternative, Derrida defends interpretive techniques that analyse ‘the functioning of language’ and thus note the problematics of reference and assertion.47 On this view, ‘“good” literary criticism’ – indeed, ‘the only worthwhile kind’ – tries not to offer a coherent summary or analysis of a literary text, but instead ‘never lets itself be “completely objectified”’.48

The practical dismissal of literary assertions is particularly apparent in Derrida’s analysis of Franz Kafka’s parable ‘Before the Law’. Derrida might have understood the parable as asserting a very deconstructive insight: the story describes a man who tries to gain admission to ‘the law’, but is barred by a doorkeeper; he waits for many years, only to learn just before his death that no one ever gains access to the law. In this way, the story could offer an allegory for the fruitless pursuit of a clear referential foundation for language.49 However, this would be to read the story transcendentally. Derrida thus instead suggests:

The story Before the Law does not tell or describe anything but itself as text. It does only this or does also this. Not within an assured specular reflection of self-referential transparency [. . .] but in the unreadability of the text, if one understands by this the impossibility of acceding to its proper significance and its possibly inconsistent content, which it jealously keeps back. The text guards itself, maintains itself – like the law, speaking only of itself, that is to say, of its non-identity with itself.50

This is to say that the Kafka parable is interesting for Derrida not because its allegorical content is philosophically persuasive, nor even because it is about itself in a way that demonstrates its awareness of its textual nature, but rather because its elements function together in such a way as to make the text ‘unreadable’, by which I take Derrida to mean impossible to paraphrase – as he puts it later, ‘ultimately ungraspable, incomprehensible’.51 It thus guards itself, preventing access to its ‘content’.
And finally, the dismissal of the text’s ‘overt’ or ‘superficial’ ideas is an essential part of the process of ‘symptomatic reading’ and the broader ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. The classic statement of this sort of reading is Fredric Jameson’s 1981 text *The Political Unconscious*, which asserts that ‘interpretation proper’ or ‘strong rewriting’ depends upon ‘some mechanism of mystification or repression in terms of which it would make sense [. . .] to rewrite the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code’. Moreover, responding to an interlocutor who claims that ‘the text means just what it says’, he writes:

Unfortunately, no society has ever been quite so mystified in quite so many ways as our own, saturated as it is with messages and information, the very vehicles of mystification [. . .] If everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either: evidently that is not our case.

The point here is that, as with the previous three models, attention to the text’s straightforward assertions misunderstands the right way to approach cultural products; one ought instead to look for what the text does not or, as Jameson points out elsewhere, cannot say. This lets the critic penetrate the cover of ideological mystification and reveal the way in which the text is a symptom of some more fundamental process.

Although Jameson prefers an emphasis on political processes, his reference to the possibility of multiple versions of fundamental codes alludes to the notion that critics using a number of different theoretical frames could deploy this tactic of reading. And much of the literary criticism since 1981 has indeed taken Jameson’s provocative argument as an interpretive guide, to the extent that Eve Sedgwick – who herself developed a powerful symptomatic reading in *The Epistemology of the Closet* – remarked in 2003 that ‘in the context of recent U.S. literary theory’, ‘to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is [. . .] widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities’. Rita Felski summarises this attitude by remarking that current approaches ‘share the conviction that the most rigorous reading is one that is performed against the grain, that the primary rationale for reading a text is to critique it by underscoring what it does not know and cannot understand’. Felski makes clear that Jameson’s suggestion has been thoroughly followed, as a variety of theoretical frameworks have been deployed as fundamental ‘codes’ used to identify
some feature of the world that the literary text ‘does not know and cannot understand’.

What is important here is the fact that Derrida, Jameson and their compatriots and followers dismiss literary assertions in the same way that the New Critics and the structuralists did. Admittedly, in Derrida’s analysis, the ideas in Kafka’s parable matter insofar as they produce ‘unreadability’, whereas in Jameson’s analysis, the ideas matter insofar as they produce an ideological cover; both differ from the New Critical emphasis on their subsumption to form and the structuralist reference to them as evidence of linguistic laws. But there is nevertheless an implicit agreement among all these ways of approaching a text that the ideas are not worthy of analysis in themselves, and that the literary critic must in some sense look past them.

The Ethical Turn’s Suspicion of Moral Philosophy

I have suggested that the commitment to formalism is deep and broad, and that it is as much an instinct as it is a reflective position. One area of scholarship where this is clear is the criticism in the movement that scholars have come to call the ‘ethical turn’. In an area where it would seem natural to work out the nature of thoughtful reading and of interpretive practices that emphasise content, what one finds in fact is that an emphasis on content became a mark of shame, and that reading for the content, when that was construed as treating a literary text as if it had asserted an ethical or philosophical claim, was for virtually all critics something to be avoided.

To see this, let me briefly survey the broad movements in the ethical turn, which involved the confluence of several trends in late twentieth-century thought. The first trend, which one might call the ‘Aristotelian’ thread and where the major figure was Martha Nussbaum, arose out of Anglo-American analytic moral philosophy and drew on works of literature – particularly the great Greek tragedies – to develop a neo-Aristotelian challenge to the dominant utilitarian and Kantian positions. The second trend, which one might call the ‘Hegelian’ thread and where the major figures are Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor, involved challenges to dominant ‘scientistic’ epistemological and ontological models, arguing that ‘facts’ are constituted by consciousness just in the same way ‘values’ are, and that it is a mistake to be any more sceptical of the latter than of the former. Seeing the self and the world this way made literary texts a natural ally; as Michael Eskin notes, Rorty called in
part for a ‘turn away from theory and towards narrative’. A third trend, best thought of as a ‘Post-Structuralist’ thread, depended on the rethinking of ethics in the late works of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. This trend, perhaps because of the deep influence post-structuralism has had on contemporary literary criticism, was the first to generate book-length reconsiderations of the relationship between ethics and literature from within the literary academy. But of course, there had always been a few critics and philosophers who resisted the trends of their fields, working on autochthonous projects along these lines.

And since these initial arguments, there has been a flood of ethical criticism of all kinds. Though it is perhaps obvious, it is worth stressing the diversity of thought that falls under this rubric: neo-Aristotelian moral philosophers, Levinasian post-structuralists and followers of Stanley Cavell perhaps form the core, but the ‘ethical turn’ has grown large enough to incorporate thinkers from many traditions and backgrounds. As such, it would be a mistake to see the ‘ethical turn’ as resulting from a shared research programme; rather, there was a confluence between several relatively independent intellectual movements. Despite these differences, there was a key claim on which the canonical interpretations in the ethical turn depend. Eskin describes it well: what ‘is at stake in “ethics” and literature’, he writes, is ‘the singular encounter’ between the reader and the text. In other words, ethical criticism has generally assumed that if there is something especially ethically interesting about literature, it is because there is something peculiar about the nature of literature, a peculiarity that creates a relationship with the reader that is fundamentally different from the relationship readers have with non-literary texts.

A classic and in many ways representative example of this kind of argument occurs in J. Hillis Miller’s influential *The Ethics of Reading*. In his analysis of *Adam Bede*, he claims that even though the novel is committed in its ‘overt affirmations’ to ‘realism as exact reproduction’, its ‘covert argument is for a use of figurative language’. The tension between these two impulses is not an accident, but is rather the necessary result of the ‘law of reading’, which involves the way the text makes present its own unreadability. What makes the novel ethical, then, is not its overt treatment of moral dilemmas and problems in practical reasoning; instead, it is the way that presentation is necessarily undermined – and the experience of that necessity in reading *Adam Bede* is an experience of a law like the Kantian categorical imperative. Thus, the ideas in the book are not interesting as such; they are only interesting as elements in the unstable pattern of the novel as a whole.
This basic claim about the distinctiveness of literature merits interrogation. It depends on a sense of the strangeness of literary experience, eliding the potential insights that literary texts might offer in more ordinary terms. But the notion that literature is peculiar in this way is neither obvious nor self-evident. The claim reflects the influence, though critics in the ethical turn rarely explained this, of the long anti-cognitivist tradition in literary criticism and the century-long championing of aesthetic form. And to posit the peculiarities of the encounter with the literary text as central in this way misses the ways in which literature is a kind of ethical thinking recognisably valuable in the same way as any interesting philosophical or theoretical text. The dismissal of this thinking emerges particularly clearly in the dispute between Wayne Booth and Adam Zachary Newton.

For Wayne Booth, the ethical value of a literary text depends on its implication of an author, whose values the work under interpretation shares with the reader. The metaphor Booth lands on for this theory of reading is ‘friendship’: the reader encounters the text and its implied author in the way we might meet a friend. As he puts it, ‘For our purposes, all stories [. . .] can be viewed not as puzzles or even as games but as companions, friends – or [. . .] as gifts from would-be friends.’ On this view, then, the reader engages in a process of communal evaluation that Booth calls ‘coduction’. He offers an example of this process in an extended reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, a book he initially admires. However, upon drawing out the ‘fixed norms’ of the implied author, which include the belief that ‘Black people are [. . .] so naturally good that the effects of slavery will not be discernible once slavery is removed’ – his coduction ultimately finds the text problematic.

Adam Zachary Newton departs from Booth’s claim that the moral value of fiction lies in the sharing of values by arguing that if fiction is ethically compelling, it is precisely because it is not transparently available to readers:

By purposeful contrast, my proposal of a narrative ethics implies simply narrative as ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process. [Thus] the difference lies between readings which allegorize the [text’s] events to a second-order story of translated meaning and those I will develop in ensuing chapters which attend exclusively to the shape, the drama, and the circumstances of the [text’s] own story, its strictly narrative details, since that story already reads, or allegorizes, itself.
Newton’s point here is that previous critics have thought of the relationship between ethics and fiction as consisting in a two-step process: first, one interprets the text and establishes a meaning; second, one evaluates it according to the basis of some criteria. Though they might disagree about what these criteria should be, they share a conception about how ethical criticism ought to proceed. Newton contrasts this with his own way of reading, which will forgo the evaluative step in favour of a closer, more intimate reading. As he goes on to put it, ‘It is the difference, to put it another way, between a deontology and a phenomenology [. . .] One faces a text as one might face a person, having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy, an immediacy of contact, not of meaning.’\footnote{This is an extract from the original text.}

Newton argues in particular that Booth’s model of ‘friendship’ depends on a view of reading as receiving a message from the author, which fails to sufficiently consider the way the reader is involved prior to the clear construction of the message. In his words, ‘acts of assent, surrender, seduction, coercion and bestowal all occur inside fictional texts; we must be a party to these, before we construe literary texts as messages sent from authors to readers’.\footnote{This is an extract from the original text.} And this is a version of a critique of philosophical ethical criticism made elsewhere: Simon Haines argues, for instance, that ‘even the most alert and well-intentioned of philosophers still read poems or novels as if they were containers or vehicles with separable concepts inside them, or as if they were examples of re-formulable ideas’; while David Parker suggests that ‘the ethical interest of imaginative literature is not then, as often implied, in ethical propositions that can be gleaned from it’.\footnote{This is an extract from the original text.}

This criticism requires two responses. The first is that this kind of critique is not quite fair: if Booth, Nussbaum and other philosophical literary critics arguably in practice do construe texts as expressing a message of ‘ethical propositions’, this is not at any rate how they understand themselves. While Booth certainly holds that texts have values with some sort of content, he does not conceive of this simply as a message the text conveys to the reader – indeed, part of what makes friendship with a text so interesting is the way the text and the reader interact in producing the reading experience.

And to the extent that Booth does not in fact offer a view that reads literary texts for their ‘re-formulable ideas’, it indicates a gap in the field. Thus, my second response would be that there is a place for an un-selfconscious version of the kind of criticism that Newton dismisses. Precisely because they do not wish to see narratives as just carrying a message, Booth and Nussbaum (another common target of this criticism) do not work out what it would mean for literary
texts to do so. Although they appeal to ideas in narratives at various moments, these appeals are subsumed in the broader approach; the comprehension of ideas in reading a literary text matters only as an element in an experience that cannot be understood in purely intellectual terms. Thus, although Booth recognises that literary texts can have ‘profound intellectual import’, he contends that the critic must understand these aspects as part of a text’s ‘miraculous unity’.79 Similarly, although Nussbaum suggests that Henry James’s novels present ‘the best account I know’ of moral perception, she insists that her approach does not turn literary texts into ‘systematic treatises, ignoring in the process their formal features and their mysterious, various, and complex content’.80 Both of these approaches thus preserve a sense of the special features of literary experience. And to the extent that they remain committed to the formal uniqueness of literary texts and the readerly experience of them, the analysis of what it means for a literary text to express ideas goes under-developed.

Joshua Landy’s response to the ethical turn in his 2012 book *How to Do Things With Fictions* ironically ends up duplicating this same pattern. Early on in the book, Landy speaks of the need to ‘rescue’ literary criticism from the ‘meaning-mongers’ who constantly read for ‘the message’ of literary texts – thus reiterating the process of accusing one’s rivals of reading for the message in order to lend support to one’s own, supposedly more formally sensitive, theory of criticism.81 But Landy doesn’t offer a specific example of a contemporary critic who is a meaning-monger: his example in a footnote, tellingly, is Jennifer Lopez’s discussion of the movie *Crash* in her speech at the 2006 Academy Awards, and he speaks broadly and generally of this approach to literature as one ‘currently being taught in high schools’ and ‘evaluated in the public domain’.82 As my argument so far would suggest, Landy’s inability to find a specific ‘meaning-monger’ is not surprising: at least at the level of literary theory, form-fetishists are much more common.

Why does this pattern keep recurring, whereby one writer insists that another is simply reading for the message, while himself distinguishing his own view from a straightforward reading for the message? Why did Landy have to bring Jennifer Lopez into this? Not, I submit, because these critics share a theory about the essential importance of literary form of which Lopez was unpardonably unaware. As the review of literary theory in the twentieth century above suggested, a commitment to form has been able to survive vast disagreement about why it was important. Rather, talking about the importance of ‘form’ has become a way of marking one’s sophistication as a critic. Correspondingly, an instinctive sense of the complexity and peculiarity of literary texts, and
a view of criticism as the tracing of this complexity, undergirds all these arguments. But that instinct has become so prominent and widespread in literary theory that no one is open about rejecting it, and so disputants and interlocutors must be found elsewhere.

Yet for all that, Landy is not wrong to think that reading for the meaning is indeed a common practice, and that meaning-mongers really do exist. They just don’t exist – at least not any more – at the level of literary theory; one must move out into the world of ordinary, garden-variety literary criticism. Here it is possible, and in fact not difficult, to find instances of meaning-mongers, when that is construed as a critical emphasis on literary content. And there is moreover a sort of repressed or at any rate marginalised tradition of this sort of thoughtful reading: all the while that theorists were insisting on the importance of form over content, practising literary critics have long demonstrated a continuing interest in the content of the works they engage. This tradition reflects an insight that literary theory would do well to acknowledge; as Julie Orlemanski writes, ‘I am inclined to give more credence to what we do in our discipline than to what we say about what we do.’83 To put it another way, we might take the recurrence of this kind of reading – the omnipresent but quiet meaning-mongering – as a guide to an alternate theory of the literary text. To start that process, let me highlight a few moments in the history of reading for the content.

A Buried History of Reading for the Content

Cleanth Brooks’s The Well-Wrought Urn, perhaps the quintessential articulation of anti-cognitivist literary aesthetics, appeared in 1947. The very first mentions of the book naturally appeared in bibliographies of recent scholarship; what is telling about such lists is how much of the criticism published in the heyday of New Criticism was not, in fact, new criticism. To pick one salient example, Modern Philology’s list of criticism on Victorian literature for 1947, which contains a citation for The Well-Wrought Urn, also includes a book called Human Dignity and the Great Victorians by Bernard Schilling.84 This book appears to have faded from the critical consciousness – it has been cited eight times in the last thirty years. Yet it makes for surprisingly interesting reading. Schilling is interested in the way free market capitalism in Victorian England, both as practised and as theorised, undermined the human capacity for dignity; he traces how various nineteenth-century writers, from Coleridge through Matthew Arnold to William Morris,
sought to criticise market-based social structures and reaffirm the fundamental dignity of the person. This is to say that Schilling insists on the importance of the authors he considers as thinkers, a point that was obvious to the book’s reviewers: George Boas’s brief review of the book concludes by noting, ‘there will be no longer any excuse for seeing nothing but the “aesthetic” in these poets and novelists. Professor Schilling has made that impossible.’

Among the first articles to use the expression the ‘heresy of paraphrase’ in print was an essay by Peter Viereck called ‘My Kind of Poetry’ in an August 1949 issue of a now-defunct magazine called *The Saturday Review.* Viereck is sceptical of the new approach; as he writes, ‘The “heresy of paraphrase,” as it is called, is supposedly an insult to the intelligence of the reader. I wish more poets would “heretically” heap insults on my intelligence by paraphrasing their “double-crostics”.’ Admittedly, Viereck is perhaps not entirely fair; Brooks is happy to concede Viereck’s contention that paraphrases are an essential tool in coming to understand a poem, and Viereck admits that paraphrase is inadequate by itself. Nevertheless Viereck was right to see to himself as opposed to the New Criticism; he writes that his own poetry violates the new dicta for poetics because he has ‘content – something to say about the profane world they scorn – and not only form’. Viereck was writing in part because he had a message to convey, and as he puts it here, engaging his poetry means understanding that message. In this sense, the dispute about paraphrase connects to a broader disagreement about what literature is and what meaningful engagement with it looks like.

And a glance through the back issues of *PMLA,* for more than a century a central organ in Anglo-American professional literary criticism, offers a wide variety of essays that emphasise the content of the works they engage. To pick one example contemporaneous with Brooks’s work, in September 1949 Margaret Church published ‘Thomas Wolfe: Dark Time’. The essay is an attempt to understand Wolfe’s philosophy of time, as compared to the theory of time in Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust; it is not troubled by the fact that Wolfe’s theory is expressed in fiction, beyond noting, ‘Wolfe did not write pages explaining his metaphysical solutions of the time question: he applied them’.

Moving outside the academy also complicates the history of criticism. Percy Lubbock’s contemporary H. L. Mencken combined admiration for formalist aesthetics with the celebration of the capacity to convey ideas. He commends Balzac and Zola as figures who ‘deal seriously and honestly with the larger problems of life’, and complains of much American literature that ‘the flow of words is completely...
purged of ideas’. Mencken is hardly a ‘meaning-monger’, if that phrase denotes criticism ignorant of aesthetic evaluation or sensitivity, but he does not take that sensitivity as forbidding praising literary texts for conveying ideas worth taking seriously.

Bernard Schilling, Peter Viereck, Margaret Church and H. L. Mencken are, of course, not alone. Rather, they are a few examples of the tradition of thousands of critics whose practice resisted the dominant thrust of literary theory, and who were happy to read for the content and to treat literary authors as thinkers whose ideas had intellectual weight and which were worthy of sustained attention in the face of literary theory indicating that this was a mistake. Recovering the history of this tradition is daunting, in part because of its size, but more importantly because it has never conceived of itself as a tradition. Nevertheless it is one, and one that relies on an implicit theory of the literary text worth taking seriously.

Part of the need for recovering this tradition and theorising this approach appears moreover in the sometimes tortured justifications that critics give for emphasising literary content. Consider a few more recent essays in PMLA.

At the same time, Gay renders London unlike any place that exists today. His representation of street surfacing tests our ability to see the rise of eighteenth-century London through the eyes and words of one of its citizens. Listening to this account can help us grasp two related concepts: a historical idea of the city as a gloriously broken object of upkeep and a chronologically delimited infrastructuralism able to make meaning of civic enterprises in earlier ages. (Alff)

I argue that the rational elephant can help us read early modern specieism against itself and distinguish early modernity from modernity in ways that historicise – and denaturalise – their different specieism. Remembering this creature from a bygone paradigm, one that was more capable of recognising rationality across differences in physical form, enables us to understand the past more closely in its own terms. It also provides a historically grounded vantage point from which we can question modern assumptions about the special status of nonhuman as well as human primates. (Alkemeyer)

Ultimately, a reaccounting of the historicity of Blake’s poetic text yields a heroine and a reading population struggling to view themselves as at the centre of a reflexive system that governs and exploits the mutual relation of natural and social surroundings but that also is governed and exploited by the same biopolitical apparatus. (Hadley)
What all these arguments have in common is an overt link between a historical goal and a philosophical goal. Alff wants to reveal the way a previous century viewed a city and a new way to think about cities in general; Alkemeyer wants to uncover a previous way of conceiving the difference between humans and non-humans and to question the distinction as it is currently used; and Hadley wants both to clarify a debate about an allusion in Blake and to critique a nostalgic version of environmentalism that believes mere transformations in consciousness (without changes in underlying power relations) would be sufficient.

Those goals are roughly compatible, but after a little reflection it is easy to see that they can come apart quickly. Arguments supporting the philosophical goal would be out of place in the historical account, and detail clarifying the historical account can seem unnecessary and distracting if the goal is to get to a philosophical claim. If, for instance, Alkemeyer means to question the distinction between humans and non-humans, it is not immediately obvious why that is the sort of thing that requires or even benefits from ‘a historically grounded vantage point’. And Alff’s conclusion brings out the dual goals clearly: ‘Gay’s poetic street view adumbrates a prehistory of – and alternative to – the top-down taxonomic structures we use to render urban experience legible today.’ His phrasing hides the tension, but it should be clear that the best argument for a view as an alternative is not necessarily the view that uncovers its history. Concerns such as these highlight the somewhat odd nature of this particular rhetorical structure, and make one wonder where precisely it comes from. The insistence on historicity as a way to get to philosophy – one comes at Blake’s theory of the environment only by way of recovering a historical feature of the text – suggests that the historical claims are really of secondary importance, of service mostly in justifying attention to the content of the text.

Compare this, for instance, with Rachel Hollander’s argument in *Narrative Hospitality in Late Victorian Fiction*, which contends that political changes had a transformative effect on Victorian ethics:

As colonial conflicts, nationalist anxiety, and the intensification of the woman question become dominant cultural concerns in the 1870s and ’80s, the problem of self and other, known and unknown, begins to saturate the representation of home in the English novel. In the wake of an erosion of confidence in the ability to understand that which is unlike the self, I argue, a moral code founded on sympathy gives way to an ethics of hospitality.
What one sees here is a redescription of reading for the content as a kind of historical analysis, one that turns literary criticism into an account of the impact of political and social events. But this transformation of the claim into a historical contention also renders it into an argument that literary criticism by itself is not capable of supporting. Surely, after all, the 1870s were not the first time English writers were forced to confront the problem of ‘self and other’, and so it is difficult to see shifts in ethical thinking in fiction as evidence of a unique event. The sort of link between ethical reflection and political situation would require a much more extensive and comparative history; at least, one would need to move systematically through the thinking about ethics in the fiction of preceding eras. But it is also not necessary to justify the kind of analysis Hollander subsequently does; whether late Victorian fiction reflects in important ways on the tensions between an ethics of hospitality and an ethics of sympathy is an interesting question, I submit, in and of itself.

Somewhat ironically, one also sees this sort of strained justification of reading for the content in literary criticism that avoids the historicist prong and simply claims that its primary goal is philosophical. Here I should admit that I’m knocking down a glass house. In my 2011 essay ‘Jane Austen on Love and Pedagogical Power’, I sought to call attention to the fact that Jane Austen’s depictions of pedagogical dynamics in loving relationships – in other words, teachers falling in love with students, and vice versa – were often attentive to the power structures in such relationships, a dynamic that I used ideas from G. W. F. Hegel and Michel Foucault to describe.\(^{101}\) However, I phrased the interpretation as if I were engaging in a philosophical dispute with Hegel while using Austen as an ally, writing: ‘to a certain extent, we can read this as Austen asking, “What happens if the Lord’s attempt to control the Bondsman fails?”’\(^{102}\) This way of putting it implies that the argument was really philosophical – a dispute involving an unexplored problem in Hegel’s thought – in which case the reading of *Pride and Prejudice* that the essay offers would simply be distracting, a sidetrack on the road to an interpretation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. If the question at hand really were what happens in the conflict between the Lord and the Bondsman – as opposed to how best to understand *Pride and Prejudice*, which was actually the point of my essay – then the extensive literary criticism would largely be confusing. Why bother with the details of Austen’s novel if it is really a starting point for a different kind of argument altogether?

This is to say that there is often a gap between the justification given for the argument and the actual argument that follows.
gap is indicative of a missing theory, one that would explain and defend the reasons a reader might have for caring primarily about the ideas in a literary text. In the absence of that theory, critics offer historical and philosophical gestures as justifications for their criticism, but these often do not survive sceptical examination. Rather than merely pointing out their inadequacy, however, one should go further and ask where the gap between justification and actual critical practice comes from. For this is another instance of the lip service that criticism must pay to formalism: rather than overtly admitting that they are reading for the content, critics seek out other, disparate reasons why an emphasis on content is justified in a particular instance. The notion that reading for the ideas in a book might be a reasonable practice entirely on its own (and reading for form on its own has been a distinguished form of criticism for a century) is never openly invoked, but the fact that it is the real explanation for what is going on appears in the often gestural justifications that are actually given. But critical practice can be wiser than we know: what is in fact going on here results from a different kind of reading experience and a differing understanding of the literary text. Alff, Alkemeyer, Hadley and Hollander are working with the ideas in the texts they consider, and we should take seriously an account of the literary text that values its ability to create such an experience.

Where might we turn for such an account? Well, it’s worth recalling the modernist roots of the formalist assumptions in literary studies described earlier; the near-instinctive insistence on the importance of literary form has a fairly specific origin point for its rise to prominence in method and literary criticism. Toril Moi puts the point well:

> Most academic defences of literature rest on one particular aesthetic norm, one particular definition of literature, namely that of late modernism [. . .] Such definitions are variations on the usual formalist definition of ‘literariness’, as if attention to form were the key feature of all literature, or at least of all valuable literature.103

And if we are looking for alternative methods, we might look first at the approach to literature that modernist assumptions replaced. It is worth recalling in this light that John Ruskin, the great art critic of the mid-Victorian era, was reluctant to designate the mental faculty at work in the experience of art the ‘aesthetic’; as he writes in the second volume of Modern Painters, he prefers to think of the recognition of intrinsic value, entities ‘desirable or admirable in themselves and for their own sake’, as the product of the ‘theoretic’ faculty.104
Similarly, he insisted on portraying imagination not as a faculty for unrestrained creativity, but as a means of grasping the truth: ‘Let it be understood once for all, that imagination never designs to touch anything but truth.’ And even more than the overt claim of its philosophers of art, one can look to the artistic practice in Victorian narrative to see a much different way of thinking about the value and purpose of literature – one in which innovations in literary form were often secondary considerations, placed beneath the primary goal of saying something true and interesting about an important topic. Famously, of course, this was Dickens’s defence of *Oliver Twist*: however one might object to the morality of Nancy the prostitute, Dickens is content to fall back on the claim that ‘IT IS TRUE’ as a defence of its value for aesthetic representation.

Victorian narrative is, of course, not the only place one might turn to as an aesthetic practice in which form was only of secondary importance. As Roger Maioli has recently brought out, the question of truth in art was essential to eighteenth-century debates about the English novel; novelists sought to defend themselves against charges of frivolity while simultaneously differentiating themselves from biographers and historians by expanding on the nature of truth, in such a way that a text might simultaneously be fictional and truthful. Similarly, one might think of David Foster Wallace’s diagnosis and recommendation of the ‘New Sincerity’ in contemporary fiction as a return to the capacity for truth-telling after a century of formal experimentation. In a very different tone and register, one might see Heather Love’s argument for a ‘descriptive’ turn and an emphasis on literature as a description of the world as another iteration of this tradition. And of course, it’s really a very old way of thinking about art: against Plato’s diagnosis of poetry as an elaborate form of lying, one might recall Aristotle’s contention that poetry was an expression of the universal. As we saw earlier, critics have read literary texts for their ideas about time, urban life and the environment, and to move somewhat further afield, Michael Clune has recently pointed out that H. G. Wells’s invention of the notion of time travel offers an obvious example of an exciting idea in a literary text. In other words, it could have been otherwise; I want to stress that I do not take the ideas in Victorian narrative to be the only kind of interesting content literature can offer.

But if the Victorian era was not the only point at which the true mattered as much as the beautiful in art, it was certainly one such. What Henry James called the ‘loose baggy monsters’ of nineteenth-century fiction did not lack aesthetic merit or an artistic essence, as he suggested; rather, they reflected a different sense of what value
in art might be, one in which being true was just as important and essential to artistic status and merit as being beautiful. Moreover, the content of the Victorian novel and in particular its moral thought has the attraction of what social scientists call the ‘least likely case’, as the quintessential example of a kind of content without artistic value. After all, when the British modernists claimed that they were not interested in what the work of art could say, it was exactly the Victorian tendency to offer moral claims that they were worried about. Show that even this content is interesting, therefore, and ideas in many other areas will be justified by default. Thus the specific examples I will consider are from a relatively narrow time period, roughly Victorian fiction and narrative poetry from 1850 to 1880.

But the ethics in Victorian literature are particularly interesting for the way the scholarship on the topic follows the broad critical patterns I have identified. Long the subject of severe critique, it has received renewed attention in recent scholarship in the work of critics such as George Levine, Amanda Anderson and especially Andrew Miller and Jesse Rosenthal, but such criticism is strikingly formalist in nature – indeed it is becoming more so. At the same time, there is a long tradition, one mostly undisturbed by shifts in the methods advocated by literary theory, of considering the ethical thought in Victorian literature at a more thematic level; recent books from Valerie Wainwright and Constance Fulmer indicate the general continuation of that trend. The opposition between the two traditions is not necessarily fundamental: Levine’s remark that it is a mistake to ‘condescend to the Victorians’ and to assume that ‘we have got past their questions’, and Miller’s suggestion that it is an interest in ‘moral psychology’ that ‘distinguishes nineteenth-century British literature’ could be taken as justifications for why the second tradition should exist. But the emphasis on explanatory structure is different, and the contrast between the two traditions reveals both the formalist attitude of the first tradition and the implicit alternative model of criticism in the second. Roughly, then, while I am sympathetic to both traditions, my goal here is to explore and defend the method of the second camp, and consider what its method and aesthetic theory might look like if brought into the light.

Content Versus Surface

Of course, there have been several powerful interrogations of the standard assumptions of the methodology of literary criticism in recent years, stemming in large part from a broader movement that
questioned the hermeneutics of suspicion. In the words of one critic, such alternatives seek to read ‘with’, as opposing to reading ‘against’, the ‘grain’ of the text, and the approach to content I am arguing for responds to the same concerns.\textsuperscript{116} Perhaps the most prominent of these interventions was the introduction of the concept of ‘surface’ reading in an essay by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, and, by way of conclusion, it is worth distinguishing my emphasis on content from the idea of surface reading.\textsuperscript{117}

At a broad level, the two approaches are clearly congruent: Best and Marcus describe their approach as in part taking texts ‘at face value’, and emphasising the ‘literal meaning’ of a work.\textsuperscript{118} Moreover, the relationship between philosophy and literature in my approach aligns with Best and Marcus’s sense that theory ‘is already present’ in texts, and that a criticism that restrains itself to tracing ‘what the text says about itself’ need not be a criticism that dismisses theoretical questions. And an emphasis on content fits perhaps even more closely with Marcus’s specific approach (said to be an instance of ‘surface reading’), a method she calls ‘just’ reading. She writes:

\begin{quote}
Just reading attends to what Jameson, in his pursuit of hidden master codes, dismisses as ‘the inert givens and materials of a particular text’ [. . . ] I invoke the word ‘just’ in its many senses. Just reading strives to be adequate to a text conceived as complex and ample rather than as diminished by, or reduced to, what it had to repress. Just reading accounts for what it is in the text without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation.\textsuperscript{119}
\end{quote}

There is a good deal here to admire. The approach I am recommending sees literary narratives as complex expressions of sophisticated ideas and tries to understand their elements as components of such expressions. This, I think, is a version of Marcus’s conception of texts as ‘complex and ample’, and moreover fits with her decision to account for what is ‘in the text’ as opposed to looking for evidence of absence.

Nevertheless, my own approach will not use their terms beyond this point. The approach I am defending is a content aesthetics – a theory that literary content can form part of a text’s aesthetic value and that it is possible to develop interpretive methods attuned to that value. But Best and Marcus are suspicious of a renewed aesthetics; distinguishing their approach from the ‘New Formalists’, they contend that such formalists believe that the artwork possesses ‘autonomy from ideology’, mistakenly ignoring the fact that what
‘freedom’ the artwork has lies in its ‘struggles with its historical conditions and limits’. It is not obvious why this matters: I don’t know why caring about a text’s surfaces requires a proper account of what ‘freedom’ it has or doesn’t have. One might object to the claim that artworks have autonomy from ideology on several grounds, in other words, but it’s tough to see how surface reading as such leads to this objection.

Still, it seems clear that what Best and Marcus have in mind and want to avoid is a sort of dehistoricised aesthetic evaluation. By calling attention to the way the creation of a work of art is always caught up in historically instantiated material processes, they avoid attributing to the surface reader the naive belief in aesthetic autonomy. But the aesthetic cannot be dealt away quite so easily, if for no other reason than without some version of aesthetic evaluation, it is difficult to see why artworks are worth caring about. The point is even more salient because Best and Marcus strip the surface reader of a belief in the use of cultural criticism to effect political or social change. As they state rather bluntly, ‘literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change’. If artworks aren’t worth caring about because they’re aesthetically valuable, and they’re not worth caring about because they’re sources of political change, then why should critics bother describing their surfaces?

As best as I can tell, Best and Marcus don’t think this question needs answering. Best explained in a subsequent essay that he and Marcus sought to borrow from Bruno Latour’s critique of critique, along with Latour’s broader contention that scholars should undo the Kantian turn and return to sensitive descriptions of their objects of study, instead of obsessive investigation of their conditions of possibility. Latour’s argument is that one should deny that only the study of ‘matters of fact’ merits the title of ‘realism’. What is needed, Latour argues, is a study of the way ‘matters of concern’, formed of human desires and motivations, coalesce in the objects that we call ‘matters of fact’, but a study that in so engaging such objects maintains a sense of their ‘thinginess’, of their reality. Whatever one might say about this practice in science studies – Latour’s own field – it should be clear that to bring it into literary studies wholesale ducks one of the most important questions: namely, which objects merit the close analysis that comes with unpacking the ‘matters of concern’ behind a ‘matter of fact’. The decision to interpret an Anthony Trollope novel instead of a newspaper column or a piece of wallpaper, after all, is not neutral. Symptomatic reading and deconstruction are more than just interpretive techniques: they are theories about why the objects of literary
study are worth studying, and their techniques are fitted to the properties of the objects that justify their analysis. In that sense, to dispute either approach merely on the level of interpretive technique is to miss a key feature of the motivations behind the respective positions.

Second, the ‘surface/depth’ metaphor is in several important ways misleading. Perhaps no element of the essay, which has sparked an incredible amount of response, has drawn as much attention as the vexed question of understanding what exactly the ‘surface’ of a text is. As Ellen Rooney writes, it is not clear that the metaphor is consistent with what Best and Marcus are trying to do: ‘that what the text is “saying about itself” (assuming such a saying exists) would be more visible on its surface than at some depth – why should every text eschew the possibility of a double game? – is a point that isn’t argued’. Presumably Best and Marcus would concede the point that texts can and often do play a ‘double game’, but this is much harder to account for without redefining ‘surface’ to include at least some of what would seem to be ‘depth’.

To give the most obvious example, if I grasp that a text is using irony, is that a reading that works on the surface or the depth of the text? It almost doesn’t matter how Best and Marcus would answer. If they say ‘yes’, then it would seem that ‘surface’ can be broadened to include a recognition that the literal meaning of a text is not its true meaning, which would make ‘surface’ a much more capacious and unclear category than it would at first seem to be. If they say ‘no’, then it would seem that surface reading cannot capture many of the most significant techniques that literary texts use. It is for reasons such as this that even those critics otherwise sympathetic to the project of surface reading find the metaphor unhelpful. For example, Rita Felski writes in The Limits of Critique that while she shares Best and Marcus’s ‘commitment to “looking at” rather than “seeing through”’, she is not sure ‘that the metaphor of the surface is the best way of capturing the merits of the new direction they canvass’.

The content/form distinction, of course, has its own problems. As the next chapter will suggest, giving precise definitions to either term is hardly straightforward. But ‘content formalism’ has two advantages as way of characterising an alternate methodological approach. First, it avoids the metaphors that have become so common in this debate – aside from ‘surface’ and ‘just’, recent critics have proposed ‘distant’ reading, ‘hyper’ reading, ‘reparative’ reading and ‘choratic’ reading, among others. Metaphorical labels can be useful and enabling, insofar as they can group disparate alternatives and distil them into a simple but suggestive phrase, but there is a point at
which the lack of clarity inherent in the gesture is more confusing than helpful. When a phrase is meant to capture a variety of disparate approaches not obviously compatible with each other, then the lack of a precise definition to the term appears to be a way of avoiding troubling methodological questions. But second and more importantly, a phrase such as ‘content formalism’ concedes one of the most important objections to a method based on reading for the message: there is no way to read for the content without also reading for (what critics generally designate as) form. The point is instead one of emphasis: content formalism refuses to reduce content to explanatory material for understanding the form, instead viewing form as a means of expression while insisting that much of what goes under the banner ‘form’ is, in fact, content.

* * *

Let me briefly explain how the argument will proceed. I take formalist practice in literary criticism to have three main argumentative supports, each of which assembles a variety of intuitions about what a literary text is. First, there is a basic sense that what distinguishes literature from other kinds of things in the world is, essentially, something about its form, and thus that literary analysis as literary analysis must be an engagement with form. Second and correspondingly, there is a general agreement that what it means to be historically responsive to the conditions surrounding a text’s composition is to be aware of its place in the history of form, and particularly of moments of change in that history. And a final broad intuition is that if literature can offer something like aesthetic experience or even other opportunities for pleasure, then this too must be a property of its form. In what follows, Chapters 1, 3 and 5 take on each of these ideas respectively, offering objections to the key supports and suggesting alternatives. Chapters 2, 4 and 6 then seek to exemplify those alternatives, with each chapter emphasising its differences from the version of formalist criticism explained in the theoretical chapter preceding it. But the examples and theoretical arguments are complementary: each of the exemplifying chapters in fact demonstrates the use of the alternate method taken as a whole, so that it is possible to look back on Chapter 2 – the example for a new way of thinking about form and content – and see both its use of a different kind of historical method and its invocation of a different form of aesthetic experience. With this map in place, then, let us turn to a consideration of the crucial form/content distinction.
Notes

6. Levinson, ‘What is New Formalism?’, p. 562. Bogel agrees that this is true of at least some versions of New Formalism, which are ‘engaged in a recovery of the aesthetic from the commandeerings of literary texts performed by various modes of political, theoretical, historical, and ideological criticism’ (*New Formalist Criticism*, p. 79).
8. This is, for instance, how Geoffrey Hartman begins his defence of formalism in ‘Beyond Formalism’, *MLN* 81.5 (1966), pp. 542–56.
22. There is admittedly a certain irony in claiming that this passage alludes to an important moment in the dismissal of textual ideas from literary criticism. But as will soon become clear, the Jamesian ‘idea’ has little to do with propositional content.
23. This is discernible in both positive and negative reactions to James’s aesthetics in the next generation of writers. E. M. Forster, in Aspects of the Novel, claims that ‘there is no philosophy in the novels’, and that in James everything serves ‘the interests of the pattern. The longer James worked, the more convinced he grew that a novel should be a whole [. . .] A pattern must emerge, and anything that emerged from the pattern must be pruned off as wanton distraction’ (Aspects of the Novel [New York: Rosetta Books, 2010], p. 110). T. S. Eliot, in a much more admiring tone, states that ‘James’s critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas’. The term ‘idea’ is no less complex in Eliot’s usage than it is James’s own, but the point seems to be that James does not traffic in anything so straightforward as simple propositions. This famous passage is from Eliot’s ‘In Memory’, Little Review 5.4 (August 1918), pp. 44–7. I am guided here by several sources, including most prominently McCarthy’s Ideas and the Novel.
37. Wellek and Warren, Theory of Literature, p. 124. In a recent essay, Heather Keenleyside has brought out how Wellek and Warren and the New Critics more generally were working to distinguish themselves


41. I am guided in my understanding of the history of narratology by David Herman’s many useful discussions of the field, particularly the entry on ‘Structuralism’ in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2005) and his introductory essay to *Narratologies* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).

42. Tzvetan Todorov and Arnold Weinstein, ‘Structural Analysis of Narrative’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 3.1 (1969), pp. 70–6 (pp. 70–1). In fact, Todorov faults the New Critics for producing only a ‘paraphrase of the work, which is supposed to reveal the meaning better than the work itself’ (p. 70). In this sense, the structuralists take themselves to be even more critical of interpretations that generate paraphrases than the New Critics, who would by no means have described themselves as engaged in ‘paraphrase’.


47. Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution’, p. 45.

48. Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution’, p. 52. The critic should offer ‘an inventive experience of language, in language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read’ (p. 52).


51. Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution’, p. 211.


55. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 46. Jameson overtly suggests this, noting that psychoanalysis has long served as a similar fundamental code for a number of critics, and is in some sense ‘the most influential and elaborate interpretive system of recent times’ (*The Political Unconscious*, p. 61).


58. My point here is in sympathy with Toril Moi, who writes, ‘When it comes to aesthetic strategies, then, formalism and culturalism are not as different as they seem. In fact, they are barely different at all. For how long are formalists and culturalists going to go on [. . .] losing themselves in the contemplation of the linguistic beyond?’ *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 22.

59. I do not mean to deny that there have been dissident voices recommending something similar to the approach I defend here. Gerald Graff has defended the notion that literary texts can make ‘truth claims’; see especially the ‘Literature as Propositions’ section in *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Frederick Crews’s satires of a number of theoretical approaches, most recently in *Postmodern Pooh* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), perhaps also ultimately support reading for the content. And there is also a much larger tradition of silent dissent, of which more in a moment.


65. J. Hillis Miller’s The Ethics of Reading was perhaps the first treatment in this regard; Adam Zachary Newton’s Narrative Ethics developed Derrida’s Levinasian insights a decade later. J. Hillis Miller, The Ethics of Reading (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Adam Zachary Newton, Narrative Ethics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

66. In particular, Wayne Booth, in literary studies – whose 1988 monograph The Company We Keep is a central text in ethical criticism – had long been working on the rhetorical force of fiction; similarly, Stanley Cavell, in philosophy, had been thinking about the interrelationship between normativity and literature along Wittgensteinian lines; finally, Iris Murdoch – as both a moral philosopher and a novelist – crossed the boundaries between the fields for her entire life. See Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and, for a nuanced discussion of Murdoch’s thought, Maria Antonaccio, Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

67. Lawrence Buell noted in 2000 that some fourteen hundred essays in ‘ethics-related literature scholarship’ were published between 1981 and 1997, and the number has only increased since.


69. Miller, The Ethics of Reading, p. 75.

70. Miller, The Ethics of Reading, p. 122.

71. This is in one sense broadly in line with those critics who have resisted the notion that aesthetic experience is ethically transformative. See Joshua Landy, ‘A Nation of Madame Bovarys: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement through Fiction’, in Gary Hagberg (ed.), Art and Ethical Criticism (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), pp. 63–94; and especially Suzanne Keen, Empathy and the Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

73. Booth, *The Company We Keep*, p. 70.
75. Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, p. 11.
79. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 112. Booth’s example is Dostoevsky: ‘In *Crime and Punishment* we experience a wide variety of intellectual appeals. We are curious about the philosophical and religious and political battle between nihilism and relativism on the one hand and salvation on the other’ (p. 134). However, Booth then goes on to link these ‘intellectual appeals’ to our ‘qualitative and practical’ interests as well – in the form of formal beauty and character identification.
80. Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 148, 29. Nussbaum explains further: ‘It is, in fact, just this that we wish to preserve and to bring into philosophy. The very qualities that make the novels so unlike dogmatic abstract treatises are, for us, the source of their philosophical interest’ (p. 29).
87. Peter Viereck, ‘My Kind of Poetry’, *The Saturday Review* 51 (August 1949), pp. 7–8, 34–6. As an editor’s note explains, Viereck’s essay was the third in a series of essays debating the New Criticism and the current state of poetry. The debate was quite intense: the editor writes, ‘As Mr. Viereck has pointed out, he “was serving against Fascism as an American sergeant in the Italian campaign at the very time when Ezra Pound was comfortably broadcasting his Fascism and treason from Mussolini’s Ministry of Propaganda”’ (p. 7).
99. I shall have much more to say about the relationship between historical reconstruction and philosophical argument in a moment.
104. John Ruskin, Modern Painters, vol. II (New York: The National Library Association, 1905), Section I, Chapter I, § 8. Available at www.gutenberg.org. I don’t want to overstate the value of this model, however; Ruskin’s is a fairly clear example what Toril Moi calls ‘ideal- ist’ aesthetics, in seeing a religiously inflected union of the true, the good and the beautiful (Ibsen, p. 74). I mean more simply to note that there are ways of regarding the capacity of art to tell the truth as important.
105. Ruskin, Modern Painters, Section II, Chapter II, § 22. In a recent essay, Andrea Selleri has brought out what he calls the related ‘authorialist’ assumptions of Victorian literary criticism, among which is the idea that a work of literature is something the author has said. ‘Oscar Wilde on the Theory of the Author’, Philosophy and Literature 42.1 (2018), p. 52.


111. See Michael Clune, ‘Formalism as the Fear of Ideas’, *PMLA* 132.5 (2017), p. 1194. Rita Felski’s *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Blackwell, 2011) offers as an example of the knowledge literature can offer the insights that Edith Wharton has into interpersonal dynamics.


116. This is Tim Bewes’s phrase, though I am not sure that I am using it quite the way he does. Tim Bewes, ‘Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism’, *Differences* 21.3 (2010), pp. 1–33.


118. Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading’, p. 12.


120. Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading’, p. 14. Best and Marcus are following in this regard Levinson, ‘What is New Formalism?’

121. Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading’, p. 2.

available at <https://www.representations.org/two-responses-to-denotatively-technically-literally/> (last accessed 14 January 2020). This is present in the original essay as well, which ends by invoking Latour’s contention that ‘the question was never to get away from facts but closer to them’ (‘Surface Reading’, p. 19; the quotation is from Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?’, Critical Inquiry 30 [winter 2004], pp. 225–48 [p. 231]).

124. See Latour, ‘Critique’, p. 237: ‘Why can we never describe the same stubbornness, the same solid realism by bringing out the obviously webby, “thingy” qualities of matters of concern?’
125. It seems to me that this problem remains and is if anything exacerbated in their subsequent work on the issue. In ‘Building A Better Description’, Best and Marcus – along with Heather Love – explain that they are interested in recuperating and defending description as such, as opposed to the more penetrative act of interpretation. Maybe, but the question of exactly what one should describe remains unanswered. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Building A Better Description’, Representations 135.1 (2016), pp. 1–21.