TOWARD AN INESSENTIAL THEORY OF FORM: RUSKIN, WARBURG, FOCILLON

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This essay excavates a lineage of formalist analysis that stretches from the Victorian art critic John Ruskin to the early twentieth-century art historians Aby Warburg and Henri Focillon, proposing that a fascination with what Ruskin once called "inessential form" drives these three thinkers' respective attempts to conceive of form as immanent to both matter and time. The theories of form developed by these three thinkers, while little cited in literary studies, destabilize many of the field's assumptions about the role of form in literature, from recent debates about surface versus depth to longstanding distinctions between historicist and formalist approaches to texts.[1] They do so not from the perspective of the present, of course—nor even from within the field of literary criticism—but from within the still-forming discipline of art history.

At the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, art history went through a dense reconfiguration of its own disciplinary boundaries, transforming from a hobby for aristocratic connoisseurs to a scholarly discipline with its own theoretical and methodological stakes. This process of becoming-art-history was deeply marked by the attempt to define the notion of form in relation to both the materiality and the temporality of the artwork. In the work of Ruskin, Warburg, and Focillon, close attention to form is close attention to affect, that is, how emotionally charged energies crystallize, throughout time, into pictorial and sculptural details—flowing hair, intricately sketched earlobes, or billowing garments, for example. Beginning with a discussion of Ruskin's notion of "inessential form" in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and elaborating this concept through the twentieth-century writings of Warburg and Focillon, in what follows we attempt to develop a theory of form that would account for form's motility, context-relativity, and affectivity. While concerned largely with visual art, these art historians borrowed heavily from nineteenth-century linguistics in the formulation of their key concepts and methods. Where Focillon, for example, based his conception of the "life of forms" on the French philologist Arsène Darmesteter's 1887 study, *The Life of Words*, Warburg's

notion of *pathosformel* was influenced by the German linguist Hermann Osthoff's theory of *suppletion*, which emerged within the context of the Neogrammarian School at the turn of the century. Compelled by the intellectual ambitiousness of these not-entirely-disciplined theorizations of form between visual art and linguistics, inspired by their desire to define form and describe its workings across diverse sites of intellectual and aesthetic inquiry, we turn to them to cultivate a materialist approach to language.

I. Formalism and the Problem of Reductionism

Let us begin with an observation about the role form has played in more recent literary criticism. In recent scholarship, to talk about form is often to talk about a fundamental shape or pattern to which a thing can be reduced. Rather than rejecting this assumption, we merely want to name it in order to distinguish it from the conception of form we excavate in this essay—a notion of form as that which is *inessential* to the aesthetic object and yet, precisely because of this non-essentiality, determines its existence. Our aim across the five sections that follow is threefold: 1) to isolate and describe a type of form that, while often implicitly invoked, remains undertheorized in literary studies; 2) to further wrest form from any necessary connection to meaning, identity, as well as functionality; and, 3) to offer an account of what literary criticism can, and often does, do, when it thinks—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—about form.

The assumption that to think about form entails conceptually reducing things, including literary texts, to their most fundamental and unchanging patterns has a long history from Plato's theory of *eidoi* (translated by Francis Macdonald Cornford in 1941 as "essential Forms"), to Kant's insistence on design as "what is essential" to the artwork, to Hegel's metaphysical distinction between "essential form" and "inessential form."[2] Where for Plato *eidoi* are eternal and exist beyond the transitory material world, for Kant and Hegel, likewise, form is exempt from both materiality and contingency, defined always negatively as that which is *not* accidental and, as such, is "intrinsic" to the art object.[3] Such an "essential" theory of form informs one of the most recent and widely discussed instances of the new formalism in literary studies, Caroline Levine's 2015 book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. In Levine's analysis, form is as fundamental as it is ubiquitous; it shapes everything from seminar rooms, to poems, to gender. In Levine's strategically broad definition, form concerns "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference."[4] Form here is a conceptual category that remains

stable across space and time: "bounded enclosures will always exclude, and rhyme will always repeat"; thus, although their "meaning or value may change, the pattern or shape [forms] can remain surprisingly stable across contexts."[5] Levine's theory of form, while certainly innovative, shares some basic assumptions with other "new formalist" approaches to literature. Like Levine, whose four kinds of forms (wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks) are concepts furnished with stable definitions that hold across space and time, for example, Frances Ferguson understands form as that which can "regularly be found, pointed out, or returned to," as readers encounter texts in different contexts.[6] Ferguson gives the example of a sonnet, which, once identified, is always perceptible as such. According to Ferguson, a sonnet remains a sonnet, no matter what reader it encounters or what time period it is produced or read in, and "it would not disappear simply because you were not attending to it."[7] Forms are recognizable. Forms are indisputable. Forms remain.

Borrowing a term from Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian we could also say that forms *reduce*. In their 2017 essay "Form and Explanation," Kramnick and Nersessian use the term "reductionist" to describe the tendency of many recent critics to conceive of form as "more fundamental than any contingency."[8] They use this term not in a pejorative sense but, rather, descriptively, to name the attempt to produce a stable definition of a concept that tracks across diverse sites of intellectual and disciplinary inquiry. As Kramnick and Nersessian point out, for Levine, form is the same in literature as it is in design as it is in politics. Likewise, for Sandra Macpherson, form tracks across architecture, metaphysics, and biology.[9] But where Kramnick and Nersessian initially define reductionism as the attempt to furnish one's concept "with an explicit definition that can also be used to explain aspects of the world," as eventually becomes clear, for them, reductionism concerns not only the attempt to standardize one's definition. It also names the desire to conceive of form itself as the fundamental and unchanging essence of a thing, as "the ground upon which individual examples and instances depend and to which they reduce"—what we refer to as form's essentiality.[10] In what follows, we drive a wedge between these two aspects of what Kramnick and Nersessian call "reductionism," distinguishing between the new formalism's desire to produce a robust and systematic theory of form—a theory that all critics might agree on—and one of its most basic assumptions: that form is that which is most essential to a thing, and thus that to which it can be reduced. The very premise of this essay—that a theory of form emergent in nineteenth-century art history has something to offer present-day literary criticism—should be enough to signal

how we feel about the portability of concepts across disciplines and time periods. Indeed, we hope to convince our reader that it is possible to have a theory of form that holds across different disciplinary contexts. To do so, however, as we shall argue, by no means requires approaching form as an unchanging shape or pattern to which a thing can be reduced.

Our second move is less concerned with splitting hairs and more interested in braiding them. The genealogy of formalist art-historical analysis we trace in what follows perturbs the distinction Kramnick and Nersessian make between "context-relative" theories of form and theories of form constructed to hold across different disciplines and historical moments. Across the following three sections, we discuss three universalizing theories of form that, at the same time, seek to account for form's context-relativity. Ruskin, Warburg, and Focillon might be categorized as "reductionist" in that they have a theory of form, and that their theory of form is applied to diverse sites of aesthetic and intellectual inquiry. And yet, unlike many present-day formalists, these three thinkers do not believe that the art object is conceptually reducible to its form, nor that the form of a thing has any necessary relation to what that thing most essentially *is*. Where more recent new formalists are concerned with what we call, borrowing a term from John Ruskin, "essential form," Ruskin, Warburg, and Focillon, we propose, are after something quite different—a phenomenon, which we call "inessential form." It is to this distinction that we now turn.

II. Ruskin: Inessential Form

Ruskin develops his distinction between essential and inessential form in an analysis of the representation of hair and skin in modern animal painting in his 1849 study *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. In the works of Tintoretto and Peter Paul Rubens, he remarks, a "peculiar attention [is given] to the colours, lustre, and texture of skin."[11]

"[T]he picturesque direction of their thoughts is always distinctly recognisable," Ruskin explains,

> as clinging to the surface, to the less essential character, and as developing out of this a sublimity different from that of the creature itself; a sublimity . . . whether it be sought in the clefts and folds of shaggy hair, or in the chasms and rents of rocks, or in the hanging of thickets or hill sides, or in the alternations of gaiety and gloom in the variegation of the shell, the plume, or the cloud.[12]

Figure 1. Wolf and Fox Hunt, *ca. 1616, Peter Paul Rubens.*

Ruskin perceives a related attention to the undulating surfaces of mate-
rial bodies in classical sculpture. Narrating a shift in the representation
of hair from Ancient Greek to later Roman sculpture, he proposes that
while previously hair had been "considered as an excrescence, indicated
by few and rude lines, and subordinated" to the essential form of the
figure, after the time of Pericles, hair begins to take on increased sig-
nificance, becoming a crucial site for the workman to elaborate his craft.
In these later sculptural works, Ruskin writes, "While the features and
limbs are clumsily and bluntly executed, the hair is curled and twisted,
cut into bold and shadowy projections, and arranged in masses elabo-
rately ornamental."[13]

What Ruskin calls "essential form" concerns the basic outline or shape
of a thing, figural qualities that allow an entity to be identified or recog-
nized for what it is: a mountain, a dog, Jesus. *Inessential form*, by contrast,
expresses not what is fundamental to a thing, or, relatedly, what makes it
recognizable to viewers, but what is excessive and accidental to it. It con-
cerns temporally variable and environmentally contingent qualities that,
in their changefulness, are *inessential* to the being of a thing, while at the
same time determining its existence.[14] When conceived inessentially, form
becomes an immanent property of the work of art—what, in determining
its existence, renders it *this* work—rather than a "general category into
which works are fitted, or in which they participate."[15] The distinction
between essential and inessential form is, importantly, not ontological.

Figure 2. Portrait bust of a Flavian woman, Rome ca. 90 CE.

It is not that some forms *are* essential and others inessential, but that some forms manifest themselves as essential and others as inessential depending on both objective aesthetic presentation and subjective perception. How forms manifest is conditioned by, among other things, scale, angle, light—again, both in presentation and perspective.

Another key aspect of "inessential form" for Ruskin is that it operates autonomously from "essential form" in order to variegate and heighten, but also to express feeling—or what in our contemporary theoretical vocabulary we might call *affect*. We invoke the word "affect" here not, as some readers of Deleuze have, to refer to an undifferentiated mass of intensity that never coheres enough to be "represented," but rather to name the coalescence of force in the variegated quality of the "inessential forms" to which Ruskin finds himself so attracted in his discussions of animal skins and hair. Interpreters of Deleuze have often conceived of affect as formless because they understand affect to always be a site of transition, disruption, or instability.[16] Such a theory of affect, however, as Eugenie Brinkema has recently pointed out, often relies on an "impoverished notion of form as inert, passive and inactive."[17] By contrast, Ruskin is interested in forms that convey motion and activity. While the phrase "inessential form" appears only a few times throughout Ruskin's corpus, we would argue that his work, especially his thinking on Gothic architecture, is dedicated to a concern with inessentiality.

In much of his work, though most notably in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), Ruskin traces the appeal of Gothic architecture to its elaborate ornamentation, which manifests the undulating temporality of history through inscriptions on the surface. By definition, ornaments are "inessential forms" in that they physically exceed the structure of the building they adorn. But more than their structural excessiveness, what interests Ruskin about ornaments is their "changefulness," a property that emerges because of their specific relation to spacetime: subsisting on the surface of a monument, ornaments are exposed to other bodies in a way that allows them to index both feeling and history.[18]

While a structural component like an arch or a truss remains by and large stable over time, ornaments, defined broadly as any aesthetic modulation or nonfunctional addition to a three-dimensional figure, are more susceptible to alteration. What we want to highlight here is how this Ruskin's emphasis on "changefulness" as an extrinsic formal quality introduces an epistemological shift in the conceptualization of form as impermeable to contingency that characterizes the essential lineage of form that extends from Plato and Hegel to more recent formalist literary critics.[19] In the context of the Gothic architectural style that interests Ruskin, ornaments index (and we'll return to the notion of indexicality later) the embodied experience and mood of the individual workman who carved them. Much more than the result of human intention, however, ornaments are also the product of non-intentional, inhuman forces, as the environment introduces alterations in their form. In this view,

Figure 3. Foliate Ornament, Bruges ca. 1465–90, Master W with Key.

environmental effects—whether weathering, decay, or parasitic growths on the surface of the building—are also ornamentations, as they too add to the vitality of the structure by further modulating its surface. And all ornaments are inessential in so far as, like freckles generated by the sun, they erupt on the surface of a body and are not entirely essential to that

body's existence. What's more, such ornaments are always intimately tied to affect in that, whether the worker's mood or the wind's furor, they are often 1) the mark of an affective experience, as well as 2) the site of a future one. Both *determined* and *determining*, as the example of ornamentation shows, inessential forms are a translation of force into form that can always be re-translated into force, as new bodies come into contact with them, and feel.

   The notion of inessential form, while not invoked by name, is further elaborated by Ruskin in his 1865 literary dialogue, *The Ethics of the Dust*, which turns to a geological form—that of the crystal—as a metaphor for character formation. A kind of Socratic dialogue between an "Old Lecturer" and a group of schoolgirls, *The Ethics of the Dust* tracks how character forms in response to external, environmental pressures, like rocks whose sedimented layers are a record of experiences both pleasurable and traumatic. Investigating "the conditions of force involved" in the formation of crystals, in his fictional lecture on "The Elements of Crystallization" the Old Lecturer narrates how contingent interactions between different types of substances—conditioned by temperature, altitude, and moisture, among other factors—give rise to color, texture, density, and other inessential qualities in rocks.[20] Such qualities, never neutral physical properties, are always curiously charged with affective and ethical meaning, as the Old Lecturer repeatedly personifies the rocks he describes as a means of drawing attention to the way that character—both human and inhuman—inheres not in essential form but in the inessential patterns and behaviors that emerge out of contexts. In the chapter "Crystal Sorrows," for example, crystals are shown to be like humans in that they are materially determined by physical events, "impressed by alarming circumstances," as well as actively determine their surrounds, materially, through their expression of affect.[21] He describes "unfortunate little crystals, who have been forced to constitute themselves in a hurry, their dissolving element being fiercely scorched away" as well as

> indulged crystals, who have had centuries to form themselves in, and have changed their mind and ways continually; and have been tired, and taken heart again; and have been sick, and got well again; and thought they would try a different diet, and then thought better of it; and made but a poor use of their advantages, after all. [22]

The "affect" expressed by these geological formations does not so much inhere in emotions like "sadness" or "joy" (feelings that rocks surely

neither experience or express) but rather in what we read as the "inessential form" of a material body (person or crystal), that is, the somatic record of experiences produced through interactions between affectable bodies.

In the work of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century German art historian Aby Warburg, we discover another attempt to theorize form as a materialization of emotive force that crystallizes in superfluous detail and ornamental flourish. While a thorough reconsideration of the parallels between Ruskin and Warburg's thought is beyond the scope of this essay, in further developing the notion of inessential form, we seek to unearth some key similarities between these two thinkers' respective formalisms.[23] Thus, in our next section we approach what Warburg called the *pathosformel*—a concept he obsessively theorized from the end of the nineteenth-century until his death in 1929—somewhat unconventionally as a part of the same art-historical lineage as Ruskin's "inessential form."

III. Warburg: The Pathosformel

Pathosformel—sometimes translated as "emotive formula"—names the oxymoronic cohabitation of an excessive, emotive element (*pathos*) and a rigid and repetitive element (*formel*). The notion of the *pathosformel* first emerges in a 1905 essay by Warburg entitled "Dürer and Italian Antiquity," but can be traced back to his attempt to develop what he called a "psychomonistic" theory of art in the late 1880s and 90s.[24]

Warburg coined the term *pathosformel* in an attempt to understand why certain bodily postures emerge and re-emerge throughout the history of art, crystallizing dynamic emotional energies in frozen gestures and petrified movements. Why, Warburg asks, does the melancholic so often appear as he does, his facial expression always evoking concern and intimate absorption, his hand always below the chin? Why is the expression of feminine exaltation—what Warburg calls the "nymph"—always captured with stylistic elements such as intricately twisted hair and flowing textiles?

For Warburg, *pathos* refers to the emotive quality of art which erupts, in varying intensities, in forms that convey motion or feeling, while *formel* points to a repetitive and performative element according to which these forms are reproduced throughout history. When *pathos* sediments in a particular *formula* through repetition, a *pathosformel* can be said to emerge.

In developing his notion of the *pathosformel*, Warburg departs from the more historicist approach to iconography taken by his predecessors,

Figure 4. Nymph, ca. 1485–91, Domenico Ghirlandaio.

in which the repetition of certain iconographic modules was typically explained in terms of artistic influence or stylistic filiation, and thus which created a hierarchy between the original and its copies. Warburg rejects this hierarchy in favor of a materialist theory of the artwork as a sedimentation of historically contingent affect that goes through cycles of life and death. What is at stake for Warburg with the notion of *pathosformel* is the possibility of foregrounding a different paradigm of historical transmission, one that would account for the way that forms reemerge, discontinuously, throughout time, neither as a result of an artist's individual agency or his direct influence by predecessors. Other keywords for Warburg are *Nachleben* (survival, afterlife) and *Dynamogram* (the unstable crystallization of emotional experience, a reformulation of the zoologist Richard Semon's notion of the *engram*), the former indicating the life-cycles a form undergoes according to its own residual energy and the latter emphasizing form's capacity to translate fleeting stimuli into dynamic shapes.[25] The aim of the art historian, in Warburg's view, is not to uncover the latent symbolic meaning of aesthetic forms, nor is it to reveal the sources that influenced their production (by, say, tracing the history of an icon). It is rather to identify and describe the formal qualities—the angles, patterns, and textures—that comprise a given *pathosformel*. He compares the aim of the art historian to that of a seismographer: both study the translation of *forces* into *forms*.[26]

But how exactly does one identify a *pathosformel*? Where and how does Warburg find the traces of these recurrent patterns of expression? For Warburg, the *pathosformel* is located primarily in apparently marginal details such as gestures, surface ornamentation, and what he called "accessories in motion" (*bewegtes Beiwerk*).

As Warburg notes in his work on the role of "the antique" in Quattrocento painting, in the work of Botticelli and Filippino Lippi one witnesses "a change of depiction of human figures—an increased mobility of the body and of its draperies, inspired by antique visual art and poetry."[27] In early Renaissance art, he proposes, artists begin to "turn to the arts of the ancient world whenever life was to be embodied in outward motion," thus giving rise to "new emotive formulas of gesture."[28] Warburg's work on the relationship between emotion and form was inspired by nineteenth-century scientists of animal behavior like Charles Darwin and Tito Vignoli, who had studied how emotions like fear or excitation manifested themselves in the same facial expressions, cries, and gesticulations across space and time.[29]

As Spyros Papapetros has noted, "like Vignoli's petrified animals," whose excess emotional energy ossified into frozen expressions and

Figure 5. The Descent from the Cross, *Prato ca. 1457–1504, Filippino Lippi.*

stances, "the human body in Warburg's iconography [is] petrified by an extreme level of animation that surpasses its capacity to bear it."[31] The culmination of Warburg's research, what he called the *The Bilderatlas: Mnemosyne*, traces how what he calls "engrams of affective experience survive in the form of a heritage preserved memory," passed on and remaining latent until they are triggered by historical events, whereupon they find expression in aesthetic form.[32] What we want to propose here is that Warburg's notion of the *pathosformel* elevates Ruskin's notion of inessentiality to *a theory of aesthetic form as the materialization of affect*. Inessentiality appears as that residual formal element of the artwork wherein historically conditioned emotions such as fear or melancholy (as well as inhuman, determinative forces like the fading of a fresco from exposure to sunlight)
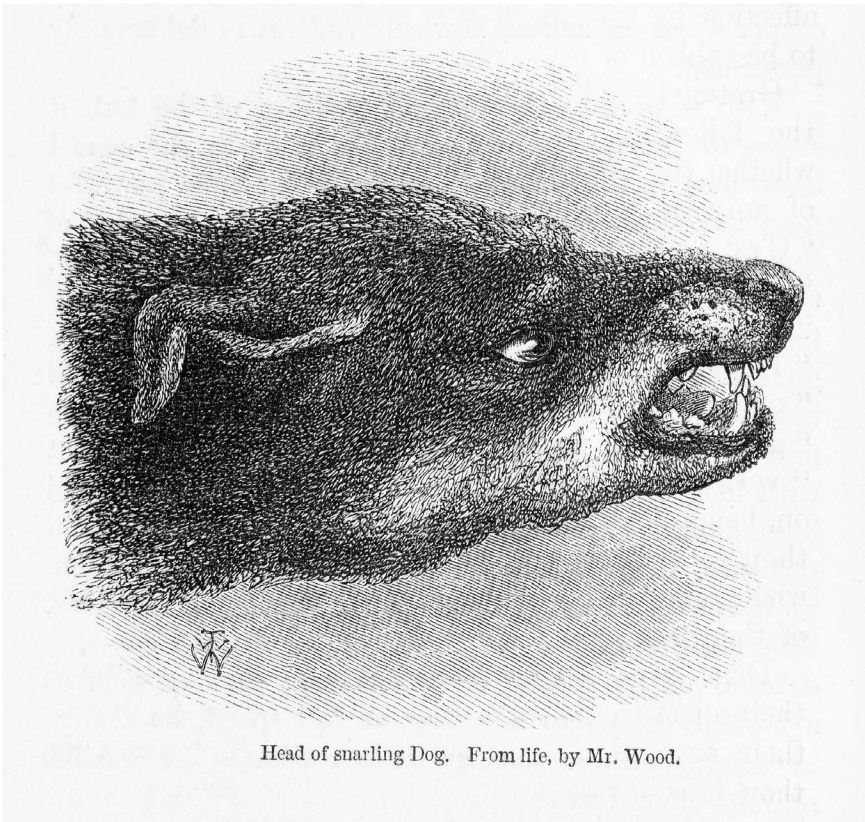
Head of snarling Dog. From life, by Mr. Wood.

Figure 6. "Snarling Dog" from Darwin's The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals. *During his days as a student in Florence in the late 1880s, Warburg took extensive notes on Darwin's text.*[30]

can affect viewers in and through their marking of an object—or, as we shall see, a page—with affectively charged shapes, colors, and textures.

The duality of the *pathosformel*—in which the abstractness of the "formula" coexists alongside the concreteness and experientiality of the "pathos"—suggests a much different conception of form than that which we have called "essential." In the work of recent new formalists such as Levine, not only is form a fundamental element of the artwork but anything and everything can be a form—and any form can take on any meaning. For Ruskin and Warburg, however, as well as for Focillon, as we shall show in our next section, not everything is an inessential form or a *pathosformel*, and the meaning of these forms is not arbitrary—at least not in the usual sense of the term.

IV. Focillon: The Life of Forms

One of the most significant and original claims of Focillon's 1934 book *Vie des formes* is that forms are marked by an intransitive quality that falls outside the realm of meaning: "whereas an image implies the representation of an object, and a sign signifies an object," he writes, "form signifies only itself."[33] While signs and images have a symbolic and referential quality that situates them always within a linguistically structured system of signification—form names an immanent quality of the artwork that operates according to its own nonreferential logic. In other words, where signs and images point to things other than themselves, forms do not. They are untranslatable and intransitive.

Focillon's distinction between the nonreferential quality of *form* and the representational quality of both *sign* and *image* opens up a question about the arbitrariness of meaning which might, at least initially, remind us of the deconstructive emphasis on an inexorable gap between signifier and signified.[34] In his development of an inessential theory of form, however, Focillon pushes us to consider a possibility quite difficult for a scholar writing in the wake of deconstruction (including ourselves) to accept: that forms, even those produced, interpreted, and utilized in human systems of value and meaning, have an inherent meaning and value of their own: "Can form, then, be nothing more than a void? Is it only a cipher wandering through space, forever in pursuit of a number that forever flees from it?" asks Focillon, anticipating Jacques Derrida's interest for signifiers without signification. "By no means," he answers: "Form has a meaning—but it is a meaning entirely its own, a personal and specific value that must not be confused with the attributes we impose on it."[35] Thus Focillon, puts us on the trail of forms, and their nonarbitrary and nonsubjective power.

As Focillon suggests, while human meanings can no doubt be imposed upon forms, the process through which forms *are transformed into signs* (what we might call representationalism, but also iconography) is a critical approach, a practice that needs to be conceptually distinguished from the life of forms itself. New meanings can be attached to forms, old meanings can be detached from them (in other words forms can become signs and signs can become forms), but forms themselves keep wavering, going through their own circuits of non-communication marked by cycles of the accretion and sloughing off of meanings.[36] Focillon asks his reader to consider the example of the interlace, a form that emerges first as a sign before taking on a life of its own as a form.

Figure 7. Fragment of a Hanging with an Interlace Band, Egypt fifth–sixth century.

While the "medical origin of this sign," he explains, "cannot be doubted," eventually

> the sign itself becomes form and, in the world of forms, it gives rise to a whole series of shapes that subsequently bear no relation whatsoever to their origin. The interlace, for instance, lends itself to innumerable variations in the decoration of the architectural monuments of certain East Christian sects: it may weave various shapes into single indissoluble ornaments, it may submit to syntheses that art-fully conceal the relationship of their component parts, or it may evoke from that genius for analysis so typical of Islam the construction and isolation of completely stylized pat-terns. In Ireland the interlace appears as a transitory, but

endlessly renewed meditation on a chaotic universe that
deep within itself clasps and conceals the debris or the seeds
of humankind. The interlace twines round and round the
old iconography, and devours it. It creates a picture of the
world that has nothing in common with the world, and an
art of thinking that has nothing in common with thought.[37]

We want to flag here, through Focillon's example of the interlace, the
marked difference between his approach to form and that of two recent
phases of literary criticism: deconstruction, with what Susan Wolfson has
called "its interest in form-dissolving theories of language; and the sub-
sequent new-historicism, with its interest in how literary form resolves
social contradictions at the (false) level of aesthetic experience."[38] The
interlace can, in Focillon's terms, neither be understood as the consolida-
tion of an historical event or social conflict, though it might result from
one, nor is it a kind of remainder or surplus of thought. Rather, "[i]t cre-
ates a picture of the world that has nothing in common with the world,
and an art of thinking that has nothing in common with thought." The
interlace, like the self-devouring snake it sometimes figures, consumes its
own meanings—meanings historical, symbolic, and ideational.

   To conclude, we want to reflect on the implications for literary
theory of Focillon's understanding of form as an "extrusion upon the
world." For us—two literary scholars thinking with and through the
lineage of Ruskin, Warburg, and Focillon—form is not only some-
thing to which a work of literature or any artwork can be reduced—a
poem strategically reduced to its rhythm or a novel to the structure
of its *bildungsroman* narrative for the purposes of a reading. Rather,
within the realm of literature, the inessentiality of form has something
to do with what we think of as the ornamental quality of language, a
quality that emerges when words begin to function less as signs and
more as forms.

V. From Sign to Form: Toward an Inessential Theory of Language

It might come as a surprise, given all his attention to the nonsymbolic
aspects of form, that Focillon modeled his study *Vie des formes* after a
work of historical linguistics, Arsène Darmsteter's 1886 *Vie des mots*,
which attempted to reveal how "languages are living organisms whose
life, though a purely intellectual one, is nonetheless real, and is in truth
comparable to that of plants and animals."[39] Darmsteter approached

language as characterized by cycles of life and death according to models derived from the natural sciences, in particular that of Darwin. What seems to have attracted Focillon to Darmsteter's project was the possibility of understanding language not merely as a medium for the communication of meaning but as a biomorphic accretion of matter that underwent phonetic alterations and grammatical changes over time (transformations occurring even more rapidly when linguistic systems are left unregulated by educational systems or other cultural governing bodies). Following Darmsteter, Focillon thus asks us to think about words not only as *signs* but as *forms*. "Forms," Focillon writes in his brief section on language, "tend to manifest themselves with extraordinary vigor. This may, for example, be observed as regards language, where the verbal sign can become the mold for many different interpretations and, having attained form, experience many remarkable adventures."[40]

When a sign becomes a form, and thus starts going on its "remarkable adventures," it transforms from the bearer of human meaning into "a kind of extrusion upon the world" (*une sorte d'irruption dans un monde*).[41] Whisked away from the meaning it may originally have had, and context in which it first emerged, it becomes a kind of an ornament, which, stripped of its original function, starts to condition its own future interpretations through the active transformation of its context. While a form might have "many different interpretations," however, its meaning is not arbitrary—nor is it ontologically distinct from the world that, however contingently, determined and continues to determine it. Let us recall here Ruskin's approach to ornaments. As inessential forms, ornaments are "accidental" elaborations of surface that result from an encounter productive of excess—in Ruskin's account, that of the laborer's body or environmental forces with the surface matter of the architectural structure. What Focillon adds to this account of ornamentation as affective excess is the power of the ornament to also shape its own context—what we think of in a more literary vein as the word qua form's capacity to shape its future encounters: "Ornament," Focillon writes, "shapes, straightens and stabilizes the bare and arid field on which it is inscribed. Not only does it exist in and of itself, but it also shapes its own environment—to which it imparts a form."[42] The word qua form thus is not only passively *formed* but actively *forms*. It is the index of a contingent but determining series of affective encounters that, precisely because it is never a direct translation of those encounters, but an ornamentation or extrusion upon them, continues to affect those who encounter it on its adventures.

The possibility of considering words as affective sedimentations that are not only the product of feeling but also produce feelings in others—words as inessential forms—brings us back to Warburg's *pathosformel*, which is itself indebted to the field of linguistics, in particular, to Hermann Osthoff's theory of *suppletion*, which emerged within the context of the German Neogrammarians in the 1870s and 1880s.[43] What animates Osthoff's theory is the desire to understand why, with striking pervasiveness, many Indo-European languages form the comparative and the superlative using words with a different root than the base adjective (for example, *good, better, best* in English; *buono, meglio, migliore* in Italian; *bonus, melior, optimus* in Latin). According to Osthoff, the reason for such inconsistency is to be found in the relation between the speaker and the person or thing that she describes: when that relation becomes more affectively intense, a deviation occurs and the original root is supplanted. In Osthoff's words, "objects of one's imagined world are perceived that much more sharply and individually the closer they stand to the feelings and thoughts of the speaker and the more intensively and vividly they usually touch the mind."[44] Certain types of words are more vulnerable than others to *suppletion*: the comparative and the superlative, as well as verbs that convey strong actions and gestures, and this vulnerability arises from language's capacity to be morphologically affected by physical phenomena, particularly motion and feelings. What we want to underline here is that Osthoff's theory of *suppletion* is a theory that takes into account the *inessential* aspect of language itself—the tendency of words to register a sudden change of intensity and channel that excess into a deviation from the linguistic norm. What the concept of *suppletion* names is words' propensity to rattle the bars of their own symbolic cage: when an object (imagined or real) gets so close to the speaker as to "touch" her mind, the words one uses to describe it are charged with an emotive energy that crystallizes within them, continuing to affect listeners and readers throughout time, albeit never in the exact same way. The leap from Osthoff's theory of the superlative as words that carry an excessive energetic power to Warburg's attempt to theorize the emergence of "superlatives of gesture" between classical antiquity and the Italian Renaissance is short.[45] Warburg's attempt to trace the trans-historical trajectory of emotionally charged expressions, moreover, and the linguistic notion of *suppletion* it draws from, has parallels with Focillon's and Darmsteter's respective attempts to study the life and death of *words as forms* throughout the centuries. Warburg's concern in his comparative studies of painting and poetry, such as those he undertook between Botticelli and Poliziano, was not to demonstrate how writers *influenced*

visual artists or vice versa, but, much more ambitiously, the attempt to, as he put it, "reconstitute a natural unity between word and image (*die natürliche Zusammengehörigkeit von Wort und Bild wieder herzustellen*)."[46]

A desire to re-suture word to image—a desire especially apparent in the work of Warburg and Focillon—motivates our attempt to develop an inessential theory of language qua form, a theory of the capacity of language, heightened in literary language, to both register and convey affective experience. As in the visual and plastic arts, *inessential form* within the realm of literature names for us not what the art object (or what it represents) *is*—the content of its "communication," for example—but rather those aspects of literary language that are "accidentally" produced through the unique material history of words and their combinations. What we are after here is not, or at least not only, what some poststructuralist theorists have called "the materiality of the signifier" but what, following Warburg, we think of as *dynamographic* quality of language, its capacity of being materially affected by the reality it also shapes.[47] The turn-of-the-twentieth-century semiotician and contemporary of all three of our theorists, Charles Sanders Peirce, gets at something of what we meas with his notion of *indexicality*, a type of signification that names the capacity of language to be "*really affected* by [an] Object."[48] For Peirce, the index is "a sign which refers to its object not so much because of any similarity or analogy with it as because it is in *dynamical (including spatial) connection* both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand."[49] In the 1970s Peirce's semiotic system was re-elaborated by film theorists for whom the index was thought to pertain especially to photography and cinema. In his seminal *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (1969), for example, the film scholar Peter Wollen proposed that "unlike verbal language, primarily symbolic, the cinema is, as we have seen, primarily indexical and iconic."[50] Without contesting the usefulness of this application of Peirce's system, we want to stress that the alignment of photography and cinema with the index and language with the symbol risks submerging that aspect of language that we call inessential—the capacity of language to index material reality, not through the communication of conscious meaning through signs ("I feel x") but in and through its non- and unconscious inscription in linguistic form.

Focillon, for his part, in his thinking of words as forms, asks us to think of them as "the graph of an activity" (*la courbe d'une activité*).[51] The word *courbe* here connotes the graphic representation of reality through the translation of varying intensities or data points into a line. One might think here not only of a mathematical function but also of the attempt to

capture the vitality of movement in a series of static images undertaken by the nineteenth-century chronophotographer Étienne-Jules Marey, or the early studies on motion and gesture such as those of Eadweard Muybridge, who paved the way for the birth of cinema in his series of photographs of animals and humans performing ordinary activities.

Focillon, however, warns us about two possible dangers "in considering form as the graph of an activity." The first danger is of "stripping it bare, reducing it to a mere contour or diagram."[52] This is the risk of considering form only in its "essential" quality. We have exemplified this tendency through the work of Levine and other New Formalists, but we might also here think of the literary eco-systems of Franco Moretti—which in their graphing of the life and death of genres over time might at first seem compatible with Focillon's approach. Moretti's taxonomization of genres, however, is likewise based on a conception of form that we are calling essential: plot and style are the decisive markers that allow him to organize his data, and words are merely symbols that denote points in space and time. Form, in Moretti's account, is a concept emptied out from its affective capacity and becomes largely synonymous with genre.[53] According to Focillon, we must resist the tendency to think of form in
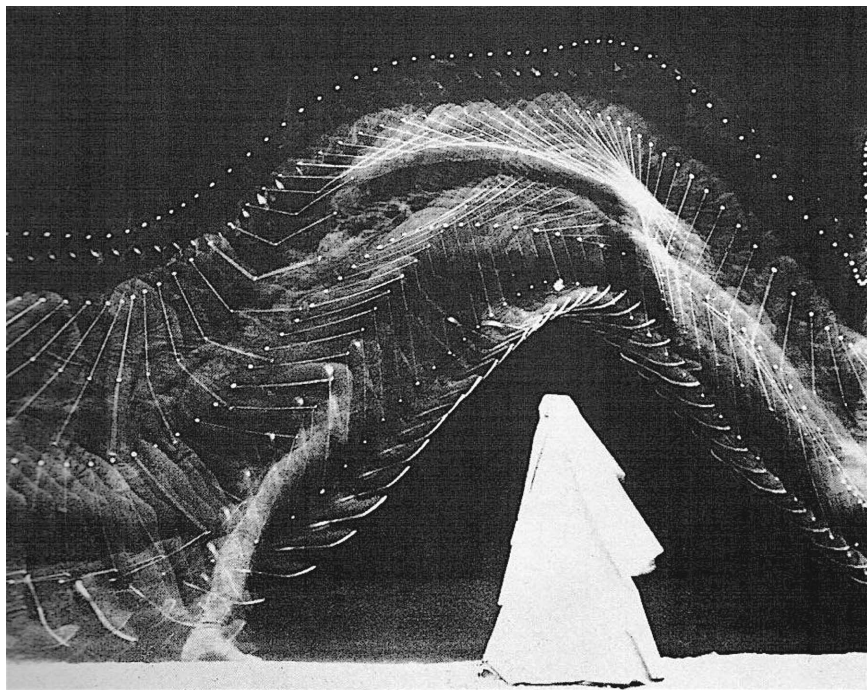

Figure 8. Chronophotography, 1887, Étienne-Jules Marey.

these reductive terms and "instead envisage form in all its fullness and in all its many phases; form, that is, as a *construction* of space and matter; whether it be manifested by the equilibrium of its masses, by variations from light to dark, by tone, by stroke, by spotting; whether it be architectural, sculptural, painted or engraved."[54] Understood in this way, words qua forms would not be representations of things but indexes of physical reality and, indeed, material things themselves. Following Focillon, if we ask what objects and words have in common we would have as answer: *inessential form*.

The second danger that Focillon identifies "in considering form as the graph of an activity" is "that of separating the graph from the activity and of considering the latter by itself alone."[55] We have already addressed the tendency, in certain strains of affect theory, to differentiate force from form, and, as such, to emphasize the extent to which affect, as a formless force, "cannot be fully realised in language."[56] Such separation can also be observed in more recent new materialist philosophy in which "forces, energies, and intensities (rather than substances) and complex, even random, processes (rather than simple, predicable states) have become the new currency."[57] Another way of putting this would be that *force* cannot be thought separately from *form*; the activity or eruption of energies need always be thought together with the form that carries it—the word or the image, in our view, being the cadaverous marker, of this activity. Thus, importantly, it is not Focillon's claim, nor is it ours, that forms have a kind of "agency" that allows them to act like living beings. Rather, Focillion's "life of forms" is a figure according to which life—far from positioned in opposition to death or inactivity—names the capacity of form, in its inessentiality, to determine existence by fossilizing historically mediated feeling.

The inessential theory of form we have been trying to unearth in this essay arises from the attempt to theorize a non-representational notion of aesthetics based on a materialist interest in the dynamographic aspect of both images and words. It is this dynamographic aspect that links Ruskin's notion of *inessential form* to Warburg's *pathosformel* to Focillon's *life of forms*. At the core of these three projects lies the attempt to foreground a notion of aesthetics that moves away from a conception of the author as creator of the aesthetic artifact, and that instead considers artworks as the products of impersonal energies (kinetic and potential) that have crystallized into forms. We thus read Ruskin, Warburg, and Focillon as key figures in an inessential formalist lineage of aesthetic theory that, in bypassing dichotomic

distinctions between object/subject, organic/inorganic, as well as universal/relative, foregrounds an understanding of forms (both artistic and natural) as fallen contingencies, which take shape through determinative, affective encounters. What distinguishes this lineage is a conception of visual and verbal signs as charged with a corporeal intensity that exceeds the form's symbolic capacity, allowing words and images to inscribe sensation materially. The idea here is not so much that the signifier bears within it a disruptive quality that undoes or defers meaning, but that language's formal, dynamographic quality allows it to index material reality in a way not dissimilar to the celluloid of a film: both absorb shapes, colors, tones, and moods that carry meaning for creators and viewers; but in neither case is such meaning contained to any person's or persons' experience of it.[58] It is contained within the form itself.

   "Art," Focillon writes, "is made up, not of the artist's intentions, but of works of art. . . . It lies under our eyes and under our hands as a kind of extrusion upon a world that has nothing whatsoever in common with it save the pretext of the image."[59] In developing our notion of inessential form, we have attended to the contingent, material encounters that determine and give rise to forms, forms that go on to have adventures of their own beyond the meanings within which they are initially imparted or the feelings that initially gave rise to them. Language, in this inessential lineage, appears less as a symbolic system that represents things to subjects than a material process occurring between bodies and environments—a phonetic and graphic outgrowth of corporeal existence.[60] Where some understand language as a self-enclosed sign system that generates its own arbitrary meanings, transposing those meanings onto matter, and yet others—believing that "language has been granted too much power"—highlight the agential capacity of matter to form and reform itself, we ask to what extent language, because material, reacts and responds, like other forms, to the world around it.[61] Here the gap between words and things is no greater than that between a cry and the pain that incites it.

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NOTES

1. See for instance, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21; Susan Wolfson, "Reading for Form," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 1–16.

2. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 183; Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 67–8; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on Logic: Berlin 1831*, trans. Clark Butler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 148. For a robust discussion of the concept of form in the history of aesthetics, see Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

3. Kant famously distinguishes between *beauty*, as that which is "intrinsic" to the artwork, and *charm*, which is mere "*ornamentation*." Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 67–8.

4. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.

5. Levine, *Forms*, 7.

6. Frances Ferguson, "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 157–70, quotation on 160.

7. Ferguson, 160.

8. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017): 650–69, quotation on 656.

9. See Macpherson, "A Little Formalism," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 385–405.

10. Kramnick and Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," 654, 656.

11. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, vol. 8 of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: Longmans, 1903), 240.

12. Ruskin, 240.

13. Ruskin, 239.

14. In this sense, Ruskin's notion of inessentiality connects to that of Giorgio Agamben in his book *The Coming Community*. In a crucial passage of that text, Agamben writes that "[d]ecisive here is the idea of an *inessential* commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence. . . . Whatever is constituted not by the indifference of common nature with respect to singularities, but by the indifference of the common and the proper, of the genus and the species, of the essential and the accidental." See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 17–18.

15. Nathan Brown, "Baudelaire's Shadows: Toward a Theory of Poetic Determination," forthcoming in *On Macherey's Theory of Literary Production*, eds. Audrey Wasser and Warren Montag (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2021). We are inspired here, in our elaboration of Ruskin's conception of inessential form by Brown's wished-for "materialist approach to form, in which [form] is immanent to particular works, rather than constituting an abstract criterion to which they either adhere or do not."

16. See Brian Massumi's definition of affect as "a moment of unformed and unstructured potential" and his statement that "of the three central terms in this essay—feeling, emotion, and affect—affect is the most abstract because affect cannot be fully realised in language, and because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness." Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

17. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), xiii.

18. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 10 of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: Longmans, 1903), 204.

19. See note 14.

20. John Ruskin, *The Ethics of the Dust*, vol. 17 of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: Longmans, 1903), 328.

21. Ruskin, 334.

22. Ruskin, 334.

23. While both Ruskin and Warburg were integral to shaping European scholarship on Botticelli, most critics draw contrasts between their respective approaches. Ernst Gombrich, for example, distinguishes Ruskin's art historical project from that of Warburg on the grounds that the former's conception of art was rooted in an evolutionary understanding of human civilization as veering towards continuous perfection—a notion of which Warburg was deeply critical. See Ernst Hans Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 59.

24. See Aby Warburg, "Dürer and Italian Antiquity," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. Kurt W. Forester, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and Humanities, 1999), 553–58. As noted by Spyros Papapetros, from 1888 until 1903, Warburg worked on a project called *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistichen Kunstphilosophie* [Foundational Fragments for a Monistic Psychology of Art]. In his notes for this project, one finds aphorisms and quotations relating to topics such as natural philosophy, monism, and vitalism (including an extensive section on Bergson). Among Warburg's sources for these quotations were Roberto Benzoni's *Il monismo dinamico* (1888) and Johannes Schlaf's *Psychomonismus* (1908). See Spyros Papapetros, "On the Biology of the Inorganic: Crystallography and Discourses of Latent Life in the Art and Architectural Historiography of the Early Twentieth Century," in *Biocentrism and Modernism*, ed. Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche (Famham: Ashgate, 2011), 77–106.

25. In Georges Didi-Huberman's words, Warburg's term *dynamogram* "is meant to discern a form of historical energy, *a form of time*. All of Warburg's thinking about temporality appears to be constructed around hypothesis concerning phenomena which are rhythmic, pulsating, interrupted, alternating, or panting." Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, trans. Harvey L. Mendelsohn (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 108. As Christopher S. Wood points out, "Warburg's unpublished notes suggest that one of the key conceptual sources for the pathos-formula was the *engram*, a term coined by the psychologist Richard Semon to denote the capacity of living organisms to carry the traces of events and stimuli, thus preserving those stimuli in social memory. The *engram* was the direct imprinting of stimuli on substance. . . . Warburg transmuted this term into his own private term 'dynamogram.'" Christopher S. Wood, "Aby Warburg, *Homo victor*," *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014): 1–24, quotation on 18.

26. For a discussion of the historian as seismograph in Warburg, see Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 71–2.

27. Aby Warburg, "Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. Kurt W. Forester, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and Humanities, 1999), 563–591, quotation on 563.

28. Aby Warburg, "The Emergence of the Antique as a Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance Painting," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. Kurt W. Forester, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and Humanities, 1999), 271–274, quotation on 274; Aby Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. Kurt W. Forester, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and Humanities, 1999), 89–156, quotation on 108.

29. On Darwin and Vignoli's influence on Warburg, see Spyros Papapetros, "Darwin's Dog and the Parasol: Cultural Reactions to Animism," *e-flux* 36 (2012); Papapetros, "On the Biology of the Inorganic," 96; Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 72.

30. Papapetros, "Darwin's Dog and the Parasol."

31. Papapetros, "On the Biology of the Inorganic," 96.

32. Aby Warburg, "The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past," trans. Matthew Rampley, *Art in Translation* 1, no. 2 (2009), 273–283, quotation on 278.

33. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Jean Molino (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 34.

34. This deconstructive legacy can be seen to persist in new formalist work that approaches form as a neutral and empty container that can be meaningfully politicized in different ways, according to the subject or context that gives it meaning. For Levine, for example—whose "essential" theory of form we read in a deconstructive vein as emphasizing the arbitrariness of the sign—because forms have no inherent meaning, "politics" consists in utilization of different forms to different ends, depending on whether one likes or does not like the work that they are currently doing. Thus, one might make use of a hierarchy, such as that between "man" and "woman," to either oppress or liberate. While the gender binary no doubt produces two unevenly valued terms, especially when intersected with other forms, Levine suggests, it can also be used to organize "to progressive effects." What strikes us in this essential account of form is not only the arbitrary relationship between form and meaning (any hierarchy can be used to any end) but also the non-arbitrary relation between form and identity when form is considered only in its essential aspect (form organizes and shapes things such as to render them socially recognizable). "After all," Levine writes, "it may be precisely because identity categories are characteristically simple that they can spread and be generalized. . . . The gender binary has force, in short, because it is *reductive*." Put otherwise, it is *because* forms qua identities always fail to capture the particularity and materiality of actual people—because of their conceptual reductiveness, that is—that forms are (both perniciously and fruitfully) portable. Levine, *Forms*, 85, 95.

35. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 35.

36. "Sometimes," Focillon writes, "form might be said to exert a magnetic attraction on a great variety of meanings, or rather, it might be compared to a kind of mold, into which

are successively cast different materials that, yielding to the contours that then press upon them, acquire a wholly unexpected significance. . . . And sometimes form, although it has become entirely void of meaning, will not only survive long after the death of its content, but will even unexpectedly and richly renew itself." Focillon, 38.

37. Focillon, 39–40.

38. Susan J. Wolfson, "What Good Is Formalist Criticism? Or *Forms* and *Storms* and the Critical Register of Romantic Poetry," *Studies in Romanticism* 37, no. 1 (1998): 77–94, quotation on 77.

39. Arsène Darmsteter, *The Life of Words as the Symbols of Ideas* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Company: 1886), 3.

40. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 38.

41. Focillon, 34.

42. Focillon, 66.

43. On the relationship between Warburg and Osthoff, see Anna Guillemin, "The Style of Linguistics: Aby Warburg, Karl Vossler, and Hermann Osthoff," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4 (2008): 605–26. On the influence of nineteenth-century linguistics for Warburg's conceptualization of his atlas of images, *Mnemosyne*, see Omar Calabrese, "La geografia di Warburg. Note su linguistica e iconologia," *Aut aut* 199 (1984): 109–20.

44. Osthoff quoted in Guillemin, 615.

45. Warburg, "Dürer and Italian Antiquity," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 558.

46. Warburg, "Bildniskunst und florentinisches Bürgertum," in *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike—Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der Europäischen Renaissance* (Hamburg: Severus Verlag, 2011), 94–126, quotation on 96. Translation ours.

47. See Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 11. On the materiality of the signifier in poststructuralism, see also note 60.

48. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 102.

49. Peirce, 102.

50. Peter Wollen, "The Semiology of the Cinema," in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 124.

51. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 33.

52. Focillon, 16.

53. In Moretti's work—in which models derived from evolution theory are applied to the study of literature—"form" is said to be "the literary analogue of species." Taking inspiration from Ernst Mayr's *Systematics and the Origin of Species*, wherein "the concept of "allopatric speciation" (allopatry = a homeland elsewhere) explained the genesis of new species by their movement into new spaces," Moretti hopes to explain how new literary forms arise through the transportation of genres into geographic spaces beyond those in which those forms were originally born. However, this evolutionary model does not so much uncover the existence of unexpected or "new" literary forms as it reaffirms the categories inherited by more traditional accounts of literature: his species are the Gothic novel, the Bildungsroman, the historical novel, the Spanish picaresque novel, the sentimental novel, and so on. Moretti's attempt to destabilize the history of literature through geography and evolutionary theory—"This was a happy essay. Evolution, geography, and formalism"—thus ends up reinforcing the system it hopes to contest, in part because,

in our reading, it cannot move beyond an essential understanding of form according to which the qualifications for a text being recognized as an instance of a given form are always determined in advance. Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), 1, 2. See also Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998).

54. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 33.

55. Focillon, 33.

56. Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 30.

57. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 1–46, quotation on 13.

58. In contrast to (post)structuralist theorists for whom the gap between words and things is inexorable and untraversable, we are here more open to the suggestion, which Paul De Man famously warns against in "Resistance to Theory," "that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world." Such openness may indeed mean that we at times "confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies"; however, returning for a moment to Saussure's foundational categories, we would argue that the shared materiality of sign and signified has merely been repressed in the construction of the (synchronous, ideational) category of *langue* over and against the (diachronous, material) category of *parole*. In other words, it is the dynamographic aspect of language that must be forgotten—or at least pragmatically excluded—in order to produce the so-called arbitrariness of the sign. De Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, 11.

59. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 34.

60. To resist the separation of subject and object in this way would entail affirming what Pier Paolo Pasolini once described as the "scandalous existence of a language without a double articulation"—that is, a language that is not bifurcated into meaningful morphemic units (words, sentences) and those units' meaningless material components (sounds, marks). Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Written Language of Reality," *Heretical Empiricism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 197–222, quotation on 200.

61. Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–831, quotation on 801.