

FORUM

Form as Enabler

TO THE EDITOR:

Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld's "The Contingency of Form in Renaissance Poetics" (vol. 138, no. 5, Oct. 2023, pp. 1094–109) offers an intriguing and learned argument in favor of flexible and open-ended interpretation. She argues that metaphrasis, the possibility of rewriting a poem into a different form, encourages "a kind of thinking that . . . allows for a future that is open to a wider range of possibilities than those we perceive in the present" (1104). Her aim seems to me just, in line with Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay's *The Emergence of Prose* (U of Minnesota P, 1987), and a welcome correction to much traditional philology and likewise to much recent theorizing.

But it too runs aground on too rigid a notion of form. Rosenfeld gestures toward loosening up "a taxonomic approach to genre" in which fixed forms preexist the poems that employ them (1095). Yet in her examples, as well as in traditional poetics, metaphrasis (literally, transformation) simply means replacing one form with another, as with her instance of Edward Howard's 1687 rewriting of book 1 of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* into couplets. Within "the range of forms" that a poem "could have been, might have been, should have been, or would have been under an alternative set of conditions" (1095), something else is imagined, but the something elses remain taxonomic. I miss a discussion of the flexibility of forms themselves. A form is a reservoir of possibility, not merely a tool, let alone "a thing and a process not easily separated from matter" (Douglas Bruster; "The Materiality of Shakespearean Form"; *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*, edited by Stephen Cohen, Ashgate, 2007, p. 33). The association of forms with material conditions is problematic. In this connection, Rosenfeld includes the *Modern Language Quarterly* special issue *Reading for Form* as an instance of "the field's dominant concern with matter" (1106n27). With insignificant exceptions, even in Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown's expanded book version of the special issue (*Reading for Form*; U of Washington P, 2006), "matter" appears only as the verb ("what matters") or in the meaning of a topic ("a matter of"), never imputing any kind of materialism to form.

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How does this matter? I'll give two examples from the essay. First, the end of the first stanza of book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*, the lines about the degeneration of the world: "Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square, / From the first point of his appointed sourse, / And being once amisse growes daily wourse and wourse" (qtd. on 1097). Rosenfeld has delightful and illuminating comments about the extra foot in the hexameter, when the rhyme is already secured with the first "wourse," which would make a pentameter couplet. But the expansion ("wourse and wourse") is not just a requirement of the stanza form that makes the line into "the prosodic articulation of another world" (1099). Complexities may be missed if the hexameter is not seen as a formal irony as well as a formal conditioning. For "sourse"- "wourse" appears to be an off rhyme. Spenser's rhyming practice is notably free, and orthography is not a reliable guide (see Catherine Nicholson; "Old Spelling and the Forging of Spenser's Readers"; *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 2, June 2010, pp. 173–204). For instance, Spenser rhymes "are" with both "bare" and "circulare." "Worse," in one spelling or another, is rhymed with both "source" and "reimburse." Under these circumstances, it is discretionary whether to try to take phonetics into account. But that is the point. The insistence of "wourse and wourse" may thus be read as a constriction rather than an expansion, as an ironization of the stanza form rather than a high-spirited liberation by means of the stanza form.

That is perhaps cutting too fine a distinction, a subject for debate rather than for determination. Consider, then, a second example, also drawn from Rosenfeld's essay. Eirena appeals to the fairy queen for redress, and the queen "Chose *Artegall* to right her to restore; / For that to her he seem'd best skild in righteous lore" (qtd. on 1098). Here, too, the hexameter contains a superfluous foot, though not at the end: drop "to her" and the meaning of the line is not at all affected. However, "her" wavers throughout the stanza between Eirena and the queen. The form does not constrict meaning (worse . . . and yet worse), but instead it unleashes possibilities (which she is "her"?). In such a case, the form that requires the extra foot is an enabler rather than a confiner. And these cases should be taken as typical. The force of form is not what it does to the poet but what the poet does with it. Even in the face of metaphrasis, expression always occurs within a form as the framework for innovation. As Caroline Levine has written (surely as one among a great many), structures are a "necessity. . . ; we cannot do without them" ("Structures All the Way Down: Literary Methods and the Detail"; *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 2, June 2023, p. 133).

After all, what would human life be like if we did not have grammar?

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