

Places of Form in Early Modern Poetics: Art, Mind, and Voice

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‘Abstract words & phrases which have an excellent genealogy are apt to live a little too much on their reputation & even to sink into dangerous imposters that should be made to show how they get their living’.¹ So wrote George Eliot in one of her notebooks as she wrestled with the concept of artistic form. In another notebook, she pursued this interest through an attentive reading of the literary theory of the English Renaissance, transcribing remarks by George Gascoigne, Edmund Spenser, Gabriel Harvey, King James, William Webbe, Thomas Campion, and Samuel Daniel, from the last of whom she copied the following dictum, at once illuminating and involuted:

The body of our imagination, being as an unformed Chaos without fashion, without day, if by the divine power of the spirit it be [...] wrought into an Orbe of order & forme, is it not more pleasing to nature that desires a certainty & comports not with that which is infinite &c.²

¹ George Eliot, ‘Notes on Form in Art’, in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. by Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 431-36 (p. 432).

² George Eliot, *A Writer’s Notebook, 1854-1879*, ed. by Joseph Wiesenfarth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), p. 124; see Samuel Daniel, *Poems and a Defence of Ryme*, ed. by Arthur Colby Sprague (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 138.

This essay shares both Eliot's sense of form's logical slipperiness and her interest in the knotty locutions of a theorist like Daniel. The concept of form is one of many borrowed by early modern theorists from other disciplines in the service of critical insight; its roots in logic and philosophy lend it a sometimes deceptive reliability. The interstices between such abstract words and the literary phenomena they were enlisted to name were, and still are, among the most vexed and yet liveliest places of criticism. The very flaws and contradictions of the philosophical language on which theorists of poesy drew could, as we shall see, be imaginatively generative for poets and playwrights as they strove to articulate the labile relation between the institutions of their art and the idiosyncrasies of the creative mind, the personae it projected, and the voices with and in which it spoke.

The concept of form is notoriously overdetermined by multiple philosophical lineages. The term 'form' could, in consequence, be made to bear diametrically opposed meanings and so become genuinely if unintentionally obfuscatory in the hands of early modern authors. The Latin word *forma* variously translates the Greek *μορφή*, *εἶδος*, *ἰδέα*, *σχῆμα*, *τύπος*, *πλάσις*, and *παράδειγμα*, and might be related in different ways to a nexus of other Latin terms, including *species*, *genus*, *exemplar*, and *figura*.³ Lurking behind it lie Plato's immaterial forms; Aristotle's four causes (formal, material, efficient and final); the Aristotelian logic of definition, in which genus and difference correspond to matter and form; Aristotle's hylomorphic understanding of substance as the union of matter and form; and the logical-cum-metaphysical category of 'quality', which includes habits and dispositions, capacities and incapacities, passive and affective qualities, and forms and shapes (*μορφαί* and

³ For a useful guide to this lexical thicket, see the entry on 'species' in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. by Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 1031-37.

σχήματα)—not to mention the centuries of commentary, translation, and appropriation by Christian theology that had encrusted these already complex concepts.

The confusions to which the term might give rise cast a certain irony over recent attempts to advocate a return to formalism in literary criticism. Essays in ‘historical formalism’ often acknowledge the problem of the label.⁴ But critics nevertheless persist in using ‘poetic form’ in the rather abstract sense suggested by such modern definitions as ‘the objective organization within each artwork of what appears as bindingly eloquent’ or ‘the stasis achieved in the poem between all the interests it activates’.⁵ Most early modern writers would have had little patience with these elusive locutions, but it would be wrong to think that a historicized return to form could ever be a return to a fixed concept. Indeed, we now tend to use ‘form’ to denote precisely those things—types of stanza, rhyme, rhythm, metrical patterns, rhetorical schemes—that Julius Caesar Scaliger understood not as poetry’s form but as its matter, the ‘materia poeseos’ which occupies the second book of his great critical compendium, the *Poetices libri septem* (1561). For Scaliger, by contrast, a poem’s ‘forma’

⁴ See, *inter alia*, Douglas Bruster, ‘The Materiality of Shakespearean Form’, in *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*, ed. by Stephen Cohen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 31-48 (esp. pp. 34-37); and Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (eds), *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For more general explorations of the complexity of the term ‘form’, see Angela Leighton, *On Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1-29; Caroline Levine, *On Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 1-23.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), pp. 142-43; Winifred Nowottny, *The Language Poets Use* (London: Athlone, 1965), p. 221.

consists in what it represents.⁶ William Scott, writing in 1599, similarly distinguished between imitation, ‘the soul and form of poetry’, and metrical language, its ‘matter or rather the proper habiliments and clothing’.⁷ An opposite but equally conventional distinction, borrowed from the Latin rhetorical tradition, is made by William Webbe, who divides his attention between literary ‘matter’, understood as ‘res’ or content, and ‘form’, understood as versified ‘verba’. Moreover, the polemical aim of his *Discourse of English Poetry* (1586) is to ‘reform’ versification by establishing a new paradigm or ‘platform’ for English metre.⁸ In George Puttenham’s *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), meanwhile, the primary sense of ‘form’ is ‘genre’. The eleventh chapter of the first book discusses ‘poems and their sundry forms and how thereby the ancient poets received surnames’ (‘heroic’, ‘lyric’, ‘elegiac’, and so on). But in Puttenham’s second and third books, ‘form’ is also used of stanzas in general, of shape poetry or ‘proportion in figure’ in particular, and, briefly, of style.⁹ This says something about the sheer interoperability of early modern critical terminology, a point

⁶ Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem* (Lyon: Antoine Vincent, 1561), pp. 55, 80.

⁷ William Scott, *The Model of Poesy*, ed. by Gavin Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 13.

⁸ William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetry*, ed. by Sonia Hernández-Santano (Cambridge: MHRA, 2016), pp. 87-105 (on ‘matter’) and 105-32 (on verse); for ‘reformation’ and ‘platform’ see pp. 62-63. For a philosophical rebuttal of the equivalence of matter and argument, see Scaliger, p. 55.

⁹ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. by Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 115, 155, 180, 184, 186, 190, 233.

Gavin Alexander has recently made in relation to another of Puttenham's keywords, 'proportion'.¹⁰

Even the most philosophically and philologically adept critics were drawn into form's terminological messiness. The Dutch scholar Daniel Heinsius explains that the 'parts' of tragedy are either formal or material; the formal parts include 'fabula', 'mores', 'sententia', and 'dictio' (Aristotle's *μῦθος*, *ἥθος*, *διάνοια*, and *λέξις*). But Heinsius concedes that 'fabula' can be understood both as tragedy's 'forma' and as 'materia'; it is also tragedy's end ('finis') and its soul ('anima').¹¹ (Heinsius herein follows Aristotle's association of *μῦθος* with both *τέλος* and *ψυχή*.)¹² Bernard Weinberg wrote that there was in the sixteenth century 'no sure grasp on the logical instruments that would have been needed to make of the device of the four causes a valid basis for discussion of the poetic art'.¹³ But this casts as a shortcoming something that many writers happily recognized and could playfully exploit:

For tell me *Crittick*, is not *Fiction*

The soule of Poesies inuention?

Is't not the forme? the spirit? and the essence?

¹⁰ Gavin Alexander, 'Sidney, Scott, and the Proportions of Poetics', *Sidney Journal*, 33 (2015), 7-28.

¹¹ Daniel Heinsius, *De tragoediae constitutione liber* (Leiden: Joannes Balduinus, 1611), pp. 31-40; printed with separate pagination as an appendix to *Aristotelis de poetica liber* (Leiden: Joannes Balduinus, 1611).

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a22-23, 1450a38-39.

¹³ Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), I, p. 50.

The life? and the essentiall difference?¹⁴

John Marston, the author of this invective *scherzo*, simultaneously affirms the validity of such critical vocabularies and parades their arbitrariness. The place from which Marston draws these terms is the boggy vernacular hinterland of the Aristotelian ‘philosophy of the Schools’. While Marston’s repeated ‘and’ perhaps signals that these words are each philosophically valid and not merely indifferently synonymous, the lexical copiousness on display here erodes any clear distinctions among them. This is calculatedly ironic, since in their natural academic habitat these terms were designed to aid conceptual precision. Most obviously, an ‘essentiall difference’ is a logical feature of a definition—that which distinguishes something from all other members of its genus. Marston thus alludes to the possibility that poetic theory might yield to logical analysis, but also suggests that there would be something odd about such an effort.

MOULDS OF ART: FORMS IN THE MIND

Marston’s ambivalent intuition was variously, and more seriously, enacted by a range of early modern critics. Some pursued the idea that poetry was part of the art of logic, building on an ancient tradition that understood Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* as appendices of his logical *Organon*; others used logic’s tools of definition and differentiation to think about concepts like genre. More immediately relevant to concepts of form, however, was a further critical application of logic: as an instrumental discipline that could be employed in any area of

¹⁴ John Marston, ‘Reactio’, lines 87-90, in *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. by Arnold Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961), p. 83. For further discussion of this passage, see Introduction, p. 000.

inquiry, its tools of definition, analysis, and exposition might be used to regulate and organize theoretical knowledge about literature, treating poetics as a discipline in the humanist encyclopaedia (that is, the interconnected realm of instrumental knowledge).¹⁵ Logical procedures could give the art of poetry structural clarity, ensuring the self-consistent coherence of its constituent precepts. An excellent English example is Scott's *Model of Poesy*, which draws on a number of English and continental sources both for its substantive content and for its logical method.¹⁶ An art thus fashioned by logic achieved a kind of settled form. In one prominent tradition of sixteenth-century thought, inspired by the French logician Petrus Ramus, the arts of the encyclopaedia were commonly said to have been 'conformed' by logic: William Temple writes of 'disciplinas [...] artificio conformatas' and Abraham Fraunce of 'the conformation of arts', while Ramus's own distillation of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* is presented as 'iustam legitimeque conformatam ethicam'—a complete and properly formulated art of ethics.¹⁷

¹⁵ On poetry, poetics, and the encyclopedia, see Tomlinson's essay in this volume.

¹⁶ See my "'An Instrument of Reason": William Scott's Logical Poetics', *Review of English Studies*, 67 (2016), 448-67.

¹⁷ *Francisci Mildapetti navarreni* [i.e. William Temple] *ad Everardum Digbeium anglum admonitio de unica P. Rami methodo reiectis caeteris retinenda* (London: Henry Middleton, 1580), sig. D2r (cf. sigs. A3v, E4r); Abraham Fraunce, *The Lawiers Logike* (London: William How, 1588), sig. Bb3r; Petrus Ramus, *Professio regia*, ed. by Johannes Thomas Freig (Basel: Sebastian Henricpetri, 1576), sig. D3v. See also, for example, Johannes Althusius, *Iuris Romani libri duo: ad leges methodi Rameae conformati* (Basel: Waldkirch, 1586); and Moritz von Hessen-Kassel, *Poetices methodice conformatae libri duo* (Kassel: Wilhelm Wessel, 1598).

I highlight this language of form or ‘conformation’ because, apart from its specific role among Ramist writers, it represents a general tendency in the period to locate the possession of an ‘art’ not in knowledge of particulars but in the artist’s capacity to marshal his individual skills, precepts, and rules-of-thumb in a coherent and architectonic way. A fine statement of this idea is provided by Clement Edmondes (a friend of Sir John Scott, cousin of the author of *The Model of Poesy*):

Arts and sciences [...] are then said to be perfectly attained, when their particular parts are in such sort apprehended, that from the variety of that individuality, the intellectuall power frameth generall notions and maximes of rule, uniting tearms of the same nature in one head, and distinguishing diversities by differences of properties, aptely dividing the whole body into his greatest and smallest branches, and fitting each part with his descriptions, duties, cautions and exceptions: for unlesse the understanding be in this sort qualified and able by logisticall discourse, to ascend, by way of composition, from singularitie to catholike conceptions; and returne againe the same waie, to the lowest order of his partitions, the minde cannot be saide to have the perfection of that Arte.¹⁸

Here logic (‘logistical discourse’) is not merely instrumental in forming an art, but is immanent in and necessary to its possession by an artist. William Scott, advancing a similar

¹⁸ Clement Edmondes, *Observations Upon the Five First Bookes of Caesars Commentaries* (London: Peter Short, 1600), sig. A1v; for his acquaintance with John Scott see sig. *2r. See also Alexander Marr, “‘Curious and Useful Buildings’: The ‘Mathematical Model’ of Sir Clement Edmondes”, *Bodleian Library Record*, 18 (2003), 108-50.

conception of artistic skill, offers his reader a ‘model’ of poesy precisely because ‘the whole frame of knowledge’ of the poetic art depends on a command of its ‘general principles’ and the ‘rearing, fit coupling, and distinguishing all the parts from this groundwork’; he undertakes to ‘show, by division, how all several kinds of poetry as the divers rooms and offices are built thereon, how the general is dispensed into the particulars, how the particulars are sundered by their special differences and properties, that as walls keep them from confounding one in another’.¹⁹ It is the theorist’s task to impart to his reader this logical structure, which possesses a kind of ‘form’ both in the architectural sense implied by the word ‘model’ and in the logical sense that the definition of poesy (being the ‘universal’ on which the whole structure depends) is, like all definitions, composed of a ‘*genus* (as they call that part which answers to the matter in bodily things)’ and of a ‘*difference* or separating part, which (as the form) gives name and proper being to the matter’.²⁰ Scott envisages that his reader will be ‘informed’ or even ‘transformed’ by his treatise—not because a certain quantity of ‘information’ will have been imparted, but in the sense that the reader will have been *given form*: the poet is thus ‘disposed by nature, informed by art, qualified by virtue’.²¹ Our ‘nature or *genius*’ can be ‘actuated and perfited by art’; but only for those with the right natural ‘disposition’ can the theorist’s doctrine ‘transform them poets’.²² Theorists of the period often (if variously) understood poetry in hylomorphic terms as a union of form and

¹⁹ Scott, p. 5.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6; compare p. 11.

²¹ Ibid., p. 83; compare p. 58. As Alexander notes at pp. 244-45, Scott’s immediate source for this vocabulary is Giovanni Antonio Viperano’s *De poetica libri tres* (Antwerp, 1579).

²² Scott, p. 8.

matter; Scott, drawing on the longstanding commonplace that artistic achievement requires both innate *ingenium* and laboured skill, thinks similarly about the very person of the poet.

The claims inherent in such a vision of the function of theory are set in high relief in the work of Fulke Greville, a poet who, like Scott, was deeply preoccupied by the world of learning and the legacy of Philip Sidney, but who often articulates a sceptical challenge to the kind of epistemological confidence audible in Scott's model of technical habituation. Greville writes in *Cælica* that the logical formalizing of technical skill impoverishes rather than perfects it:

The greatest pride of humane kind is Wit,
Which all Art out, and into methode drawes;
Yet Infinite, is farre exceeding it,
And so is Chance, of vnknowne things the cause.²³

The next poem in the sequence continues the critique: direct experience will 'Raise in our senses [...] / All forms, the good or ill can bring vs to, / More liuely farre, than can dead Books or Arts', while 'Methods, or books of vaine humanity / [...] dazell truth, by representing it'. Knowledge which does not arise from a reconfiguration of the inner self cannot but be specious, 'For till the inward moulds be truly plac'd, / All is made crooked that in them we cast'.²⁴ In the same idiom, Greville writes in his *Treatie of Humane Learning* that

²³ Fulke Greville, *Cælica*, LXIII.1-4, in *Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville*, ed. by Geoffrey Bullough, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1939), I, p. 112.

²⁴ Greville, *Cælica*, LXIV.20-22, 44-45, 35-36, in *Poems and Dramas*, I, pp. 114-15.

we raise, and mould Tropheas,
Formes of Opinion, Wit, and Vanity,
Which we call *Arts*; and fall in loue with these,
As did *Pygmalion* with his carved tree.

The juxtaposition of ‘mould’ and ‘form’ reappears later in the poem, which speaks of ‘these corrupted moulds of Art, / Which while they doe conforme, reforme vs not’.²⁵ An art, in this account, is a mould in the mind, which can mechanically replicate its own form but has no transformative power beyond its strictly defined limits. While sharing similar intellectual preoccupations and a similar lexis with Scott, then, Greville displays deep dissatisfaction with the insipidity of ‘form’—a distaste registered, as Kathryn Murphy has shown, in his repetitive and often world-weary wordplay.²⁶ The emptiness of form is registered in the sheer distance—which no change of prefix can hide—between mere conformation and the reformation it fails to effect.

‘Conformation’ can thus embrace both the process by which inchoate skill achieves form and so becomes an art and the process by which someone ‘informed by art’ can project

²⁵ Fulke Greville, *A Treatie of Humane Learning*, 25.3-6 and 125.1-2 in *Poems and Dramas*, I, pp. 160, 185.

²⁶ Kathryn Murphy, ‘Fulke Greville’s Figures of Repetition’, *Essays in Criticism*, 65 (2015), 250-73, (pp. 265-68). On the concept of the ‘mould’ in Greville’s works, see also Matthew Woodcock, “‘The World is Made For Use’: Theme and Form in Fulke Greville’s Verse Treatises”, *Sidney Journal*, 19.1-2 (2001), 143-59; and Alexandra Mills Block, ‘Reading Greville’s “Hard Characters”: Metaphor and Ambivalence in *A Treatie of Humane Learning*’, *Graven Images*, 5 (2002), 127-40.

form into material works. An earlier and significant precedent for this range of senses, and for an attendant impression of conceptual slipperiness, is found in Scaliger's *Poetices libri septem*. Scaliger somewhat belatedly—and, indeed, inconsistently—explains that this work is loosely structured by Aristotle's four causes.²⁷ It would be simplest to say that, for Scaliger, the formal cause is that which the poem imitates; the material cause, poetic language; the efficient cause, the poet; and the final cause, pleasurable instruction. However, at one point it seems that Scaliger understands the poem itself as a kind of 'materia', while 'poesis'—'making'—is the 'ratio ac forma poematis', the poem's method and form; 'poesis' is also briefly equated with the word 'conformatio'.²⁸ The exact sense of 'conformatio' in Scaliger is uncertain, thanks partly to its varied use in classical Latin: for Scaliger, it is at once the product of the teaching and training of the poet (the poet's *formation*, if you like), the process by which a particular poem comes to be (the *poem's* formation), and the ordered rationality latent in the poem itself (the poem's *form*).²⁹ The English theorist Richard Willes thought that Scaliger was talking about something that happens to the poet's mind, an 'ingenii conformatio' that enables a poem to come into being.³⁰ For later writers, 'conformatio' often pertains specifically to literary imitation, which Gerardus Joannes Vossius understands as

²⁷ Scaliger, pp. 5-6, 55, 80.

²⁸ Scaliger, pp. 5-6.

²⁹ For a more extensive treatment of this passage, see my 'Disciplining Creativity: Habit, System, and the Logic of Late Sixteenth-Century Poetics', *Parergon*, 33.3 (2016), 43-66 (pp. 56-58).

³⁰ Richard Willes, 'De re poetica', in his *Poematum liber* (London: Richard Tottel, 1573), sig. ²A6v.

‘conforming ourselves to another’s example, so that we become like them’.³¹ William Alexander describes the composition of his supplement to Sidney’s *Arcadia* in similar terms (‘I haue onely heerein conformed my selfe to that which preceeded my beginning’); and the idiom remained active decades later when John Dryden described the need, in translating an author, ‘to look into our selves, to conform our Genius to his, to give his thought either the same turn if our tongue will bear it, or if not, to vary but the dress, not to alter or destroy the substance’.³²

Dryden’s remark adumbrates the poet’s intimate self-scrutiny even as it invokes a familiar philosophical idiom, associating literary content or ‘thought’ with substance and form with the accidents of ‘dress’ or figurative ‘turn’. The ability to think logically about form in a way that is simultaneously warm-blooded and personal is also something that distinguishes Scott’s *Model of Poesy*. We have already seen that Scott understands form as a property of the well-structured art of poesy and thence of the trained poetic mind; but form also underpins his account of reading and understanding. Indeed, these things are closely linked, for ‘as in natural generation the form must be first in that that begets or imparteth it to another, so in this begetting of virtue there must be a virtuous form or habitual form of virtue ere it can be dispensed forth’. The poet’s own virtue enables him to form mental images transmissible to others. Epic poets should ‘enlighten the beauty and form of virtue’ in order to

³¹ Gerardus Joannes Vossius, *De imitatione cum oratoria, tum praeipue poetica* (Amsterdam: Lodewijk Elzevir, 1643), p. 1: ‘conformationem nostri ad alterius exemplum, ut eius similes fiamus’.

³² Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (Dublin: Society of Stationers, 1621), p. 346; John Dryden, ‘Preface’, in *Ovid’s Epistles, Translated by Several Hands* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1680), sig. a3r.

‘inform and fashion the reader’s will and affections aright’; and literary mimesis is cognitively satisfying and ethically productive because ‘our understanding is afresh informed’ by it. Such talk of form might make poetic communication sound rather abstract, were it not for the arduous intensity of the work it demands of the poet, who ‘is to be that polypus, which in sundry shapes must transform himself to catch all humours and draw them to virtue’. This is not a poetic metamorphosis of boundless freedom but something that demands strict mental control, for ‘the mind [is not] fastly capable of those expressive conceits in their diversity if it be flittingly fantastical, or if it be not free from any violent impression of any one passion’.³³

DELIVERING FORTH: FORM, PERSONA AND VOICE

There is good evidence that the sense of form which is central to Scott’s theory—an attribute of the poet’s mind—became especially prominent in the *Model*’s literary moment at the very end of the sixteenth century. It had earlier been present, of course, in Philip Sidney’s assertion that ‘the skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them’.³⁴ This statement admits a number of philosophically plausible interpretations, from the broadly Neo-Platonic to the orthodoxly Aristotelian; most likely is a case of studied undecidability.³⁵ If we pay special heed to the

³³ Scott, pp. 82, 70, 12-14.

³⁴ Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 79.

³⁵ For a survey of these possibilities, see Michael Mack, *Sidney’s Poetics: Imitating Creation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), pp. 54-61.

more Aristotelian possibilities (as Scott would have done), *idea* sounds much like the *εἶδος* which Aristotle says is latent in an artist's mind and bodied forth in his material medium.³⁶ (The Greek *ἰδέα* and *εἶδος* have intertwined histories, and Plato had used both terms interchangeably.) Clement Edmondes, whose turn-of-the-century conception of artistic theory is so similar to Scott's, says in rather Sidneian terms that 'knowledge as the intellectuall part giueth life and spirit to the action, and practise as the materiall substance maketh it of a sensible being, and like a skilfull workman expresseth the excellency, which knowledge hath fore conceiued'.³⁷ It is notable that Edmondes echoes the *Defence*'s term, 'excellency', on which hinges much of Sidney's ironic play: Sidney's statement makes 'the work' merely a sub-artistic rendering of the immaterial idea, yet on the 'excellency' of that idea's 'delivering forth' depends any confirmation of the idea's existence. A materialist poetics of excellent workmanship hides in plain sight within an idealist poetics of immaterial excellence.³⁸

The same coy acknowledgement of the necessity of that which theory deems supplementary—material instantiation—is found in *Astrophil and Stella*, where Sidney questions the true causes of an orator's persuasion: 'Whether with words this sovereignty he gaine, / Cloth'd with fine tropes, with strongest reasons lin'd, / Or else pronouncing grace, wherewith his mind / Prints his owne lively forme in rudest braine'.³⁹ This last image occurs

³⁶ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1032a28-b31; cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, 193b35-194b15.

³⁷ Edmondes, sig. A4r.

³⁸ A recent study makes this point on a grand scale: see Catherine Bates, *On Not Defending Poetry: Defence and Indefensibility in Sidney's 'Defence of Poesy'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁹ Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, 58.5-8, in *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. by William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 194.

elsewhere in the literature of the period, including the important printed commonplace-book *Politeuphuia* (1597): ‘As the seale leaueth the impression of his forme in waxe, so the learned Poet engraueth his passions so perfectly in mens harts, that the hearer almost is transformed into the Author’. This unattributed remark, highly material even in its focus on form, is in fact a straightforward translation of lines from Guillaume Du Bartas’ *L’Uranie*.⁴⁰ Indeed, Du Bartas habitually stresses the formal and mental elements of the creative process, whether poetic or divine: ‘in sixe daies God shewd his matchlesse art, / Forming this world conformall to his mind’.⁴¹ In each of these quotations, ‘form’—for all its philosophical abstraction—becomes both necessarily material and noticeably proprietary, attracting possessive pronouns to its side. John Marston, that wry and well-informed parodist of the theoretical register, plays on this in a poem of 1598, telling the same mythological story which for Fulke Greville symbolized our narcissistic pride in human arts: Marston’s Pygmalion ‘dotes on his own Art / Which he did work’, and is ‘amazed at the wondrous rarenesse / Of his owne workmanships perfection’.⁴² It is impossible to tell whether it is the fore-conceived form, the material

⁴⁰ Nicholas Ling (ed.), *Politeuphuia* (London: John Roberts for Nicholas Ling, 1597), sig. H4v; cf. *L’Uranie*, lines 89-92, in *The Works of Guillaume De Salluste Sieur Du Bartas*, ed. by Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr., 3 vols (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), I, p. 177.

⁴¹ Guillaume Du Bartas, *The first day of the worldes creation*, trans. by Josuah Sylvester (London: John Jackson, 1595), sig. D3r. On the role of a Bartasian poetics of moulded matter in the works of Sidney and Scott, see Peter Auger, ‘A Model of Creation? Scott, Sidney and Du Bartas’, *Sidney Journal*, 33.1 (2015), 69-90 (pp. 79-80).

⁴² John Marston, *The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image*, 12.5-6 and 3.1-2, in *Poems*, pp. 52-54.

workmanship, the hylomorphic artefact, or simply himself that Pygmalion has fallen for. The intensely personal quality of poetic form, located in the poet's mind, was explicitly affirmed in two important works of the following year: Samuel Daniel's searching verse essay, *Musophilus*, whose dedicatory sonnet to Fulke Greville offers, 'modelled / In this poore frame, the forme of mine owne heart'; and Michael Drayton's newly revised and expanded sonnet sequence *Idea*, whose introductory sonnet declares, 'My Verse is the true image of my Mind'.⁴³ Daniel's *Musophilus* was published in a book called *Poeticall Essayes*, and both he and Drayton, in their focus on the unique mind of the individual poet, owe something to the influence of Montaigne, for whom mental form—and the possibility of a *forme maistresse* unique to each individual—was a significant preoccupation.⁴⁴

In keeping with such contemporary developments, Scott's language of form, which emerges from his deliberate obedience to logical and philosophical norms, simultaneously enables his exploration of the individual poetic voice. This is most evident in his account of literary style, where 'form' usefully denotes both the highly general and the utterly individual. Scott writes that from the different ways in which people put words together 'doth flow a certain *quality*, so called, which is no more but the outward figure and form—as you would say the favour and physiognomy—of our writing or discourse'. The words 'favour and

⁴³ Daniel, p. 67; *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel et al., 5 vols, corrected edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), II, p. 310.

⁴⁴ On Montaigne's influence on Drayton's evolving *Idea*, see Louise Hutchings Westling, *The Evolution of Michael Drayton's 'Idea'* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974), pp. 137-43. For 'forme maistresse', see Michel de Montaigne, 'Du Repentir', in *Les Essais*, ed. by Jean Balsamo et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 844-59 (p. 851).

physiognomy' denote specific personal appearance (and indeed are so used by Scott in a letter to Robert Cecil in 1605): Scott is here thinking of 'form' as utterly idiosyncratic.⁴⁵

Scott's immediate source for this point is Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*, which defines style as 'a certain contrived form and quality' which 'showeth the matter and disposition of the writer's mind' and which bears comparison to 'physiognomy'; Scott highlights the logical implications of this concept by alluding to 'figure and form', the standard English equivalents of the *σχῆμα* and *μορφή* which fall within the Aristotelian logical category of 'quality'.⁴⁶ Having described this personal specificity, Scott moves suddenly into gross generality, writing that 'all forms of style are reduced to one of these three: either *high* or noble, *low* or base, *mean* or indifferent'.⁴⁷ Even in discussing these broad types, however, he insists that 'all style is of a sharp quickness or stirring that proceeds from the inward warmth of the affection': human specificity is ontologically prior to the logical generality of the poetic theorist.⁴⁸ As if to underline the point, Scott proceeds to discuss, in relation to style, four poetic 'virtues' which he had earlier considered in relation to content: 'proportionableness', 'variety', 'sweetness' and 'forcibleness'.⁴⁹ Scott borrows these virtues from Scaliger but makes a telling change, treating as qualities of poetic style and content what were, for Scaliger, virtues possessed by the poet himself ('virtutes poetae').⁵⁰ Scott's free play with these categories implies that he understood mimesis, style, and the poet's mind

⁴⁵ Scott, pp. 50, 252.

⁴⁶ Puttenham, p. 233.

⁴⁷ Scott, p. 51.

⁴⁸ Scott, p. 56.

⁴⁹ Scott, pp. 57-68; cf. pp. 33-45.

⁵⁰ Scaliger, pp. 113-20.

as versions (or models) of each other. This is, indeed, an intuition anticipated by the very language that theorists like Scott and Scaliger use. For example, among the many senses of the word ‘conformatio’ is, in Quintilian’s usage, ‘figure of speech’ (‘figura’), and, in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the specific figure of *prosopopoeia*—a focal point for rhetorical thinking about voice and persona.⁵¹ Figuration, style, persona, and form refuse conceptual isolation.

In the same late-Elizabethan moment of Scott, Edmondes, Marston, Drayton, and Daniel, the deep interrelation of these categories was registered and addressed with particular immediacy in one specific place of criticism: the stage. In a letter to John Rainolds in 1592, the academic playwright William Gager wrote that among the functions of his dramas were ‘to embowlden owre yuthe; to trye their voyces, and confirme their memoryes; to frame their speeche; to conforme them to convenient action; to trye what mettell is in evrye one, and of what disposition thay are of’.⁵² These loosely hylomorphic terms are suggestive, even for the commercial stage where the education of the actors was not the end in view. John Marston—an excellent parrot of the commonplaces of criticism, even when serious theoretical work is besides his point—addresses these questions in the metatheatrical induction to *Antonio and Mellida*, which was written, probably in late 1599, for performance by the Children of St

⁵¹ On these terms, see Erich Auerbach, ‘Figura’, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, ed. by Paolo Valesio (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 11-76 (pp. 11-28); and Gavin Alexander, ‘Prosopopoeia: The Speaking Figure’, in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. by Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 97-112.

⁵² William Gager, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Dana F. Sutton, 4 vols (New York: Garland, 1994), IV, p. 263.

Paul's. The boy-players know their lines, but 'are ignorant in what mould we must cast our actors'. Alberto asks, 'Whom do you personate?' and, informed that Piero will play the Duke of Venice, advises: 'Then thus frame your exterior shape / To haughty form of elate majesty'. It is Antonio whose special 'humour' is most challenging, 'for, unless I were possessed with a legion of spirits, 'tis impossible to be made perspicuous by any utterance': his character fluctuates so wildly that it would have been 'a right part for Proteus', testing the limits of the actor's transformative capacity as the theatre's mimetic mould.⁵³ These terms provide a tantalizing dramatic analogue to Scott's description of the metamorphic task taken on by the poet, albeit one more sceptical about the possibility of its realization, since the disparity between the boy-players' puny matter and the forms to which they aspire is deliberately comic.

Ben Jonson's *Every Man In His Humour* (1598; printed in 1601) includes a more optimistic description of protean personation in the role of the parasite Musco, the subject of his master's awe:

Into the likeness of one of these lean Pirgos had he moulded himself so perfectly,
observing every trick of their action—as varying the accent, swearing with an
emphasis, indeed all with so special and exquisite a grace—that, hadst thou seen him,

⁵³ John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*, ed. by W. Reavley Gair (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 59, 67-68.

thou wouldst have sworn he might have been the Tamburlaine or the Agamemnon of the rout.⁵⁴

The abilities Lorenzo ascribes to Musco—careful imitation, variation, emphasis and grace—correspond almost exactly to Scaliger’s poetic virtues: *prudentia*, *varietas*, *efficacia*, and *suavitas*.⁵⁵ Whether or not the resemblance is intended, Jonson is thinking concertedly about the forming energies of mimesis, and embedding critical questions about form, representation, and theatrical belief in both the language and structure of his comedy. In both Marston and Jonson the places of criticism acquire substance and vitality as part of a dramatic action that deliberately narrows the gap, or blurs the distinction, between the theory of form and creative practice.

A later Jonsonian analogue of Musco—*Volpone*’s Mosca—soliloquizes in similar terms on his pluripotent elegance, nimbleness, and speed: ‘Present to any humour, all occasion’, he is, in terms we have already met in Scott, ‘that polypus, which in sundry shapes must transform himself to catch all humours’, though not, in his case, to ‘draw them to virtue’.⁵⁶ Indeed, Mosca’s speech goes further than this, fantasizing about a poetic

⁵⁴ Ben Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour*, 3.2.11-16, ed. by David Bevington, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), I, p. 174.

⁵⁵ Scaliger, p. 113. Scaliger makes clear that literary *prudentia* is about mimetic accuracy: ‘id in primis animadvertendum est: ut imitatio rem sequatur’.

⁵⁶ Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, 3.1.23-29, ed. by Richard Dutton, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, III, p. 100. For cruder fantasies of metamorphosis, see *Volpone*’s speeches at 3.7.139-54 and 3.7.210-34.

intelligence which exceeds the strictures of artistic form, which is all action, all presence—something the play as a whole cannot officially endorse. The epistle that accompanied its publication in 1607 observes that ‘the too-much licence of poetasters in this time hath much deformed their mistress’, and argues that wit should be circumscribed by form and function: one of the poet’s ‘offices’ is ‘to inform young men to all good disciplines’, while ‘the principal end of poesy’ is, likewise, ‘to inform men in the best reason of living’—to communicate a *ratio* or *ars vivendi*.⁵⁷ However, many have detected in *Volpone* the incipient break-down of this instrumental aesthetic of ethical conformation.⁵⁸ The moralised language of form correspondingly acts here less as an earnest place of criticism than as a place-holder for something more elusive to the intellect. Accompanying Jonson’s overt but wavering commitment to the reforming power of the stage is an absolute confidence in the forming power of his art, which is a persistent theme both of the play’s epistle and of many of its commendatory verses. D.D. (possibly Sir Dudley Digges) writes to Jonson of ‘The strange new follies of this idle age, / In strange new forms, presented on the stage / By thy quick muse’. Jonson’s own prologue similarly promises ‘quick comedy, refined / As best critics have designed’, audaciously marking that point at which formal rule-following flickers into very life. This is in keeping with the epistle, which, even as it advertises how ‘the ancient forms [and] manners of the scene’ have been restored by Jonson’s moral labour, explains that rule-breaking may assert an artistic power which transcends (because it comprehends) mere form: ‘with what ease I could have varied it nearer his [the critic’s] scale, but that I fear to boast my own faculty, I could here insert’.⁵⁹ Jonson’s art (which is as much *Jonson*’s art as it

⁵⁷ Jonson, *Volpone*, pp. 27, 31.

⁵⁸ E.g. Harry Levin, ‘Jonson’s Metempsychosis’, *Philological Quarterly*, 22 (1943), 231-39.

⁵⁹ Jonson, *Volpone*, pp. 36, 44, 31.

is Jonson's *art*) is a formative dynamic which outdoes the metamorphic fantasies of a Mosca or Volpone.

When Jonson wrote of form in his commonplace-book *Discoveries*, he did so without aspiring to originality. In positing, for example, that 'the fable and fiction is (as it were) the form and soul of any poetical work', or that 'poesy' is 'the very fiction itself, the reason, or form of the work', he was merely ventriloquizing Aristotle and Jacobus Pontanus.⁶⁰

However, in their consonance with the dynamic enacting and questioning of ideas of form which we find in Jonson's drama, these borrowed critical formulae begin to sound a little less like the empty echoes of a philosophical language living, as Eliot saw that it might, too much on its reputation, and rather more like resonant spaces, or places, for critical and poetic thinking.

⁶⁰ Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*, ed. by Lorna Hutson, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, VII, pp. 578-79.