

Malcolm HEATH

What's wrong with formalism, and why is it so useful?

Text is distinguished by an expectation of meaning, typically grounded in the recognition that the text is a product of meaningful action. But meaning does not exist independently of an interest that determines an interpretative practice. Specifying a meaning provides an answer to the question 'what does this mean?', but there are many different questions that may be asked in that form. So the locus of meaning (and of textual effects mediated by meaning) is not text, but the text-reception complex: text is not an autonomous object of interpretation, but is partially constituted by interpretation. Consequently, formalism (that is, any interpretative practice that appeals to text as an autonomous source of meaning) is *theoretically* flawed. However, I shall argue that it is possible to mount a qualified defence of formalist *practice*.

A paradigmatically formalist concept, unity, provides an illustration. Unity has a regulative function in interpretation: we expect unity, and interpretation is guided by this presumption. The fact that a seemingly formal feature is in this way constituted in interpretation supports antiformalist theory. But despite its regulative function, unity is not itself a norm: rather, it designates an aspect of text that is subject to norms. In expecting unity we expect coherence of structure and/or content, but we do not expect the same kind of coherence in all texts: substantive norms of unity are *generically* and *culturally* variable. Aristotle acknowledges the generic variability of unity, but not its cultural variability. More generally, although he sometimes draws attention to the variability of audiences and their responses, he attaches no positive significance to it in analysing poetic forms. So his procedure is in a sense formalist, despite its apparently nonformalist orientation to the audience. This is not a paradox: reader-response criticism is formalist if it treats 'the reader' as a uniform and essentially passive object on which the text works. Since Aristotle's underlying interest is in philosophical anthropology (not cultural history or literary criticism) he can assume a universally normative audience. Such an idealised audience, being effectively uniform, can be held constant while differences in textual structure and/or content are examined as if they were independent sources of effect or meaning.

Aristotle's universalising approach is unlikely to be shared today. But an analogous methodological defence of formalist practice is possible. Achieving a manageable level of complexity for analysis in the study of any complex system requires bracketing out some variables. In interpretation, it may be convenient to fix a model of the audience: since the constitutive role of reception has ceased to be a variable, textual structure and/or content can then be treated as virtually autonomous. Formalist practice is thus detached from formalist theoretical commitments by an acknowledged idealisation. This idealisation is arguably essential to any viable nonformalist interpretative project.