

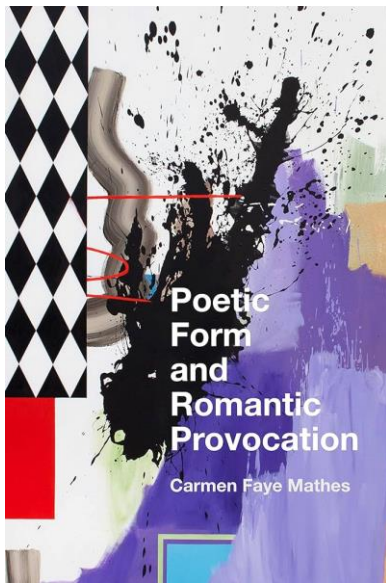
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reads

Poetic Form and Romantic Provocation

by Carmen Faye Mathes¹

POETIC FORM AND ROMANTIC PROVOCATION by Carmen Faye Mathes joins conversations about Romantic affects, which are increasingly looking to affect's political and ideological ramifications, both then and now. This insightful book focuses on poetic experiments, generic hybrids, and formal irregularities that, Mathes argues, summon but quickly thwart readers' expectations and sympathies. This conjunction of form and affect—the expectations derive from literary tradition, the sympathies involve emotional response and social ties—is the fundamental basis of the book's approach, which, in its final chapter and coda, expands most fully to include the political significance of form and feeling as it relates to abolition and justice.



The affects most commonly addressed are disappointment, hope against hope, and thwarted, partial, or mistaken sympathies with unknowable others. Theories of reading, especially S. T. Coleridge's and John Keats's, are primary points of interest, in addition to Spinoza's influence on Romantic affects and ethics, notions of Romantic subjectivity as unstable or precarious rather than solid and resolute, and affects understood to be mobile and unsettling rather than sincerely expressive of individual identity. Through discussions of Charlotte Smith, William Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and P. B. Shelley, Mathes shows, with often scintillating results, that

lyrical surprises—not only lyrical ballads or elegiac sonnets but also a sharp volta, a delayed caesura, or a missed beat—can move readers in ways that ultimately challenge social bonds or political ideologies.

The introduction makes provocation a central and productive term: 'formal provocations' can reveal 'the limits of our habitual ways of expecting things to resolve' (5) or 'educate the limits of sympathetic identification through a sense of dissonance or rupture, upon which it is possible neither to build collective understandings nor even to ground an individual's moral responsibility' (7). 'The result of such instances of being moved via poetry's metrical patterns towards a state of 'aesthetic disappointment' is often a sense of powerlessness or loss of agency: 'reading's galvanizing motions—the rhythm

¹ Carmen Faye Mathes, *Poetic Form and Romantic Provocation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

and pace with which readers feel themselves moving through a text—enact a peculiar tension between freedom and transport’ (91).

Discussions of Charlotte Smith in Chapter One highlight moments in her *Elegiac Sonnets* when ‘strenuousness’, especially ‘poetic rhythms that strain and struggle’, can ‘capture the anticipatory, negative affective intensities of a heart made sick by hoping in vain’ (28). The formal provocations Mathes identifies in the sharp voltas of Smith’s sonnets are consequences of the pivot from what she sees as a similarity between Smith’s poetic speaker and two figures: first Adam Smith’s impartial spectator and then his distraught sufferer. These likenesses unravel, though, when the social world fails to harmonize with feminine suffering. The ‘hope against hope’ that serves in this chapter’s title identifies a desire for harmony that, in Adam Smith’s unresolved sufferings, remains unmet by either social response or generic satisfaction.

In discussions focusing on Wordsworth’s ‘Simon Lee’ and Mary Robinson’s Wordsworthian echoes, formal disappointment and lyrical irregularity can confirm the unknowability of others, whether human or animal. Chapter Two argues for the importance of ‘an aesthetics of disappointment’, according to which readers are moved ‘contrary to their inclination or will’, within the formation of Romanticism (59). Unresolved expectations—for a tale’s conclusion, for example, in ‘Simon Lee’—become poetry’s ethical significance. At the sites of ‘formal disruptions—from Wordsworth’s changes to the typical ballad stanza to his use of interjections, flat rhyme and prosaic diction—the poem seems to seize without stopping, asking the reader to fall forward into awkward feelings’ (75).

Chapter Three focuses on Coleridge’s reading as evidenced in his critique of Wordsworth’s prosiness and irregularities, especially in ‘The Sailor’s Mother’. Readers of *The Coleridge Bulletin* should take note of the careful attention to Coleridge’s affective psychology of reading in the *Biographia Literaria* and the argument that, for Coleridge, Spinoza served as ‘both problem and solution’ (99). Missed or delayed metrical beats mean physical as well as aesthetic disruptions: Wordsworth’s lyrical irregularity challenges readers’ agency and ‘disrupts a theory of ideal reading that Coleridge grounds . . . in a radical materialism quite different from that which Wordsworth’s poems mobilize’ (92). This chapter’s exclusive focus on Coleridge’s prose and his reading of poetry brings one of the book’s concerns to the fore: the Romantic poets are considered almost equally as authors and readers of poetry.

A driving force of Keats’s poetics is the focus of Chapter Four: an artist’s desire for readers’ affective responses to his works to affect the author in turn, which Mathes terms ‘affective reciprocity’. In readings of Keats’s letters and ‘This Living Hand’, Mathes discusses both this concept and Keats’s awareness of other people’s unknowability with illuminating results, and the chapter recuperates Keatsian passivity from the overbearing influence of Wordsworth’s ‘wise passiveness’. In the chapter’s central argument, the final, broken line of ‘This Living Hand’, in which the speaker holds his hand towards the reader, invites the reader’s completion of the missing four beats with a question—‘will

you take it?’ This formal provocation and affective reciprocity, Mathes argues, effectively ‘replaces abstraction (i.e., metaphysical speculations about death) with immediacy’ (135).

The book’s conceptual range expands as it continues, with the penultimate and final chapters (on Keats in Chapter Four and politics in Chapter Five) occasionally straining in their connections to the clearly defined formal provocations of the introduction. Chapter Five starts with the Guantanamo project by Jordan Scott, a Canadian poet, which insists that ‘attentiveness to the suffering of others is both ethical and material: a sonorous experience captured, played and replayed in order to move listeners to physical and conceptual resonances with spaces of restraint, hostility and torture’ (151). Mathes then asks how, for unrecorded Romantics, trauma can be heard. Beginning a discussion of ‘To Toussaint L’Ouverture’, she argues here that Wordsworth’s poem ‘dehumanizes and objectifies, and it likewise elaborates deep corporeal concerns with the inextricability of subjects from the worlds they inhabit, eagerly foretelling the global affects (‘exultations, agonies, / And love’) animated by this legacy’ (157–58). Moving to Percy Shelley’s ‘Mask of Anarchy’, Mathes argues that ‘reading these poems in opposition and succession . . . reveals romantic thinking about revolutionary ideas and affects that transform personal trauma into impersonal potential on a global scale’ (158).

The close attention to lyrical form in earlier chapters is in this case delayed until the Coda, which connects her discussion of ‘To Toussaint L’Ouverture’ in Chapter Five by referencing Wordsworth’s breaking with the conventions of the sonnet form elsewhere. Here, the enjambment in ‘To Toussaint L’Ouverture’ ‘implies that the emancipatory potential of trespass depends on the existence of barriers, whether of line length or physical enclosure’ (178). Mathes then briefly considers Wordsworth’s ‘imperfect abolitionism’ (182), crediting Laurence Westgaph for calling her attention to a garden party hosted by John Bolton, a slave trader later compensated after 783 enslaved people were freed on estates where he had financial interests.

Overall, Mathes’s close readings of the provocations of poetic form are especially illuminating: Charlotte Smith’s sharp voltas and extended meters, Wordsworth’s prosy lyrics and transgressed boundaries, and Keats’s four missing beats. When these lyric provocations expand to interrogate social cohesion or Spinozist ethics, the results are themselves provocative. At its best, the book corrals a wide range of concepts and methods—Romantic psychologies of reading, affect theory, and careful attention to form. At times, though, the methodology seems loose: the focus on lyric form stretches to accommodate publication forms in strained typography (the ‘*format*’ of a pamphlet [159]) and linguistic innovation (the portmanteau ‘Peterloo’ [168–70]) are treated as instances of formal provocations akin to a delayed caesura. Further engagement with new formalist criticism and its considerations of meeting points between literary and social structures would have strengthened this capacious methodology. That said, the book’s own provocations are sure

to be generative in Romantic affect studies and critical efforts to join discussions of literary form and social justice.