

Dougal McNeill

Forms of Freedom: Marxist Essays in New Zealand and Australian Literature

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Forms, Events, Treaties

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‘How must the academic study of literature reconstitute itself in order to make a contribution in this new era?’¹ This is the question Joseph North asks in his book *Literary Criticism*, and it is a question to which Dougal McNeill’s *Forms of Freedom* responds. For McNeill, the ‘new era’ is defined by forms of capitalism that underwrite our culture’s on-going intersectional crises; we might think of these as matters of class, race, gender, and sexuality, but McNeill’s essays bring the climate catastrophe into focus too. This is also an era of striking conservatism and an era of libertarianism in which the politics of personal freedoms often erode the freedoms of many. That word, ‘freedom’, like neon in McNeill’s title, lights up a promise as much as a burden. Ours is likewise an era of populism, in which the ‘dominant classes within capitalism’ openly attack our traditions of scholarship and expertise, and where work in the Humanities has become vulnerable to the ‘democratic levellers of aesthetic distinction’.² To the populist politician ‘aesthetic’ is a by-word for elitism and privilege, yet for McNeill it might be a word by which to

1 Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Harvard University Press, 2017), 20.

2 North, quoted in McNeill, *Forms of Freedom: Marxist Essays in New Zealand and Australian Literature* (Otago University Press, 2024), 21.

imagine renewed forms of collectivism, new forms of socialism. Key to his project is a formalist reappraisal of literature.

McNeill acknowledges the influence of North's book on his own. Marx's well-known call not simply to interpret the world but to change it echoes through both texts, particularly in the emphasis both place on 'close readings', the 'old-fashioned project of an aesthetic education', which, by focusing on the formal and experiential qualities of reading, might lead to what North calls the cultivation of 'sensibilities and collectivities'.³

It is this notion of the collective that we might cite as McNeill's kaupapa: his essays encourage us to read texts as part of a collective, as objects in which tradition, the dead, the lives and labour of others are immanent, as layered with tissues of reference, allusion, and intertext, and as events of reading, such that a text becomes a kind of whakapapa relating all those who have read it with those who will.⁴ This consideration of form (the text) with time (history) describes the crucial conjunction of McNeill's book and it is why so many of the essays read like filial fragments of the larger, mosaic-like work of Adorno and Benjamin. For McNeill, a text, and more specifically a reading of text, is a kind of constellation—a moment like a flash of 'ball lightning' (as Benjamin imagined it) across the night sky, in which elements inherent in the text irrupt because of the combustible combination of the past and present. As Graeme Gilloch describes it, this 'moment of awakening is reconfigured as an instant of recollection in which the present recovers an image from the past, as the "now of recognisability"'.⁵ To think of the collective through such a form is not then

3 Dougal McNeill, *Forms of Freedom: Marxist Essays in New Zealand and Australian Literature* (Otago University Press, 2024), 21; North, *Literary Criticism*, 20.

4 McNeill uses this term in his essay on Abert Wendt and it is declared as part of a cross-cultural project that involves essaying 'different ways of talking about the dead'; *Forms of Freedom*, 134.

5 Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Polity Press, 2002), 229. Here's Benjamin's own famous description: 'It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation'. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 463.

simply to imagine what a text might contain or carry, but to imagine how the text works on ‘us’ (that potentially limitless constituency of readers), which is to say how the text exists as a formal encounter. And so it is that McNeill’s engagement with literature is set by the stress he seeks to place, not on interpretation, but the experience of a text – what it does, how it might change us. As McNeill puts it, a text is something ‘to think with’.⁶ If to think with a text is to think with all of those collected in the ever-renewing ‘now’ of its reading, then a text is a way of reading socialism as a literary form. In a nutshell, this is McNeill’s argument, a ‘socialist vision of freedom as something collectively and socially practised’.⁷

McNeill shares North’s disenchantment with the ways in which the ‘historicist/contextualist’ mode of literary scholarship has dominated the discipline for the past 50 or so years.⁸ McNeill refers to this mode as ‘diagnostic criticism’, but he has in mind what others have referred to as ‘symptomatic reading’ and the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.⁹ These are the kind of context-driven approaches associated with Marxism, psychoanalysis, or postcolonialism.¹⁰ McNeill attempts to finesse his Marxism, but as his excellent essays reveal, his scholarship remains determined by history, context, theory, and a hermeneutic Marxism nonetheless. And yet he insists on his ‘boredom and resentment’ with such an approach, which he characterises as a kind of ‘knowledge production’ driven by the imperatives of institution and industry.¹¹ In his view, such readings do little more than show ‘how untruths sustain themselves and how certain fictions keep us unfree’.¹² This sentiment belongs to a now well-established turn in literary

6 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 146.

7 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 11.

8 North, *Literary Criticism*, 20.

9 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 20; Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

10 Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

11 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 20-21.

12 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 14.

studies away from the days of ‘high theory’, back to an emphasis on form.¹³ One of our own, John Newton, writing about his experience of teaching literature in Aotearoa New Zealand in the ’80s and ’90s, describes this turn:

Whatever we might have believed we were doing inside our high-minded specialist enclaves, from the outside the impact was massively off-putting. . . . The language was so specialised, the prose so impenetrable, the voice of default so grim and censorious, that critical reading acquired an image problem it still hasn’t recovered from. . . . For all its vaunted complexity, critique was too fond of contextual shortcuts, too quick to reduce the text to its hidden determinants, and too well rehearsed in the way it thought about what those determinants might be. When I think about . . . my own experience as a New Zealandist in a university English department, it occurs to me to wonder if we didn’t unwittingly teach a generation of students not to read.¹⁴

In making the text passive, merely a symptom of something buried or repressed within it, we forgot, or so the argument goes, that ‘literary works aren’t the passive recipients of theory’s hermeneutics of suspicion’; they are themselves ‘active instigators and perpetrators of it’.¹⁵ Indeed, as I’ll argue shortly, a text always takes the form of an event. The point, however, (and it

13 While McNeill briefly acknowledges the influence of North and Felski on his thought, a vast collective of scholars, all of whom have written on the importance of form in relation to literary criticism, and all of whom pose questions similar to those implicit in McNeill’s account—what is it we do when we read, write, write about, and teach literature?—remain unmentioned. He might, for example, have made mention of Carol Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Networks* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Ross Wilson’s, *Critical Forms: Forms of Literary Criticism, 1750–2020* (Oxford University Press, 2023), or Anna Kornbluh’s *The Order of Forms* (Chicago University Press, 2019).

14 John Newton, *Hard Frost: Structures of Feeling in New Zealand Literature, 1908–1945* (Victoria University Press, 2017), 34.

15 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 42.

is one Newton goes on to make) cannot simply be to swear off hermeneutic inquiry but to integrate it with a text-based attentiveness. ‘What afflicts literary studies is not interpretation as such’, says Rita Felski, ‘but the kudzu-like proliferation of a hypercritical style of analysis that has crowded out alternative forms of intellectual life’.¹⁶

So, what is McNeill’s alternative for this ‘new era’? One answer, and it is an old one, is form, as I’ve suggested, but it is an answer shrouded and shaded by a style and method McNeill describes as ‘necessarily vague’: ‘if this has a mystical or utopian impression to it, then so be it’.¹⁷ Indeed, it is one of the several peculiarities of his book that ‘socialism’, ‘freedom’, and ‘form’ do not receive the kind of developed and critical discussion readers might expect. As if in preference to exposition, moments of obscurity, refusal, darkness, and silence (all of which are among the form-giving motifs of the essays) work together to create the impression of a kind of penumbral negative state—a ‘dark vitality’ as McNeill later suggests.¹⁸ And so it is that his Marxism reads more like the high-speed blur of Marxology: Adorno, Benjamin, Lukacs, Trotsky, Hegel, Jameson, Lenin, Williams, and Marx himself seem to bump along amiably together, though readers familiar with their work well know that their differences are in fact what have sustained Marxism.

Crucially, we are left to wonder how form is imagined by McNeill. He does offer the following: ‘Form is . . . that which is not content: the shape of a poem, the organisation of a novel, the patterning of words, techniques, style, and craft’.¹⁹ There is also this:

Form – craft, tone, the sentence, the knitting together of narrative units and the thrill of narrative time sped up or delayed – is a promise of politics to come, an invitation to freedom. Attention to form nourishes the kind of aestheticism

16 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 10.

17 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 11, 16.

18 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 183.

19 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 11.

that leads to an enjoyment in literature's qualities without any teleological utility in mind.²⁰

I imagine some readers will be frustrated by the limitations of McNeill's consideration of form. But I found myself engaged by the negative places of his prose, spinning out thoughts on form and reeling in bright constellations of images and possibilities in a process I take McNeill to associate with optimism and hope.²¹

To read for form, to read, think, and imagine 'with' it (that prepositional construction favoured by McNeill) is to evaluate literature for its medium, which is to say, for the ways that forms of address, syntactical forms, plot and narrative forms, and forms of repetition (motif, for example) cast light on the extra-textual forms by which we live our lives: social or political forms for example, capitalist forms, 'capital's time'.²² Tony Bennett, writing in 1979, put this well in summarising the work of the Russian formalists writing in the early decades of the 20th century:

the formalists argued that literature should be regarded as a practice which, through a variety of formal devices, enacts a transformation of received categories of thought and expression. Subverting the particular patterns of thought or perception imposed on reality by the categories of ordinary language, by dominant ideological forms or by the codes of other literary works, literature is thus said to make such forms strange and, in so doing, to weaken their grip on the ways in which we perceive the world. In this way, Shklovsky argued, literature "created a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it".²³

20 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 19.

21 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 11.

22 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 14.

23 Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (Methuen and Co., 1979), 24.

To ‘think with the process of [the text’s] construction’, as McNeill puts it in his essay on the Australian novelist Amanda Lohrey, is to *bare the device*.²⁴ Not only does this thought about form remind us of our relationship to the text – in fact, to the interdependency of text and reader in a kind of treaty – we are also made aware of our responsibility to and for the work’s reproduction.

But, as mentioned, what is at stake here isn’t merely, or only, literary. McNeill, drawing on Adorno, illustrates the wider implications of form in his reading of Pip Adam’s *The New Animals*. Adam’s fascination with sentence forms, he suggests, is a fascination with forms of ‘social mapping’.²⁵ The point of style, he continues, is to get us to consider how something like syntactic forms (forms of relation between words, sentences, but also ideas, and images) ‘provid[e] . . . a way of inhabiting and refusing the constricting pressures of certain new political forms’.²⁶ And so it is we find a relationship between Lohrey, writing in Australia in the 1980s, and Adam, writing in Aotearoa New Zealand in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Together, and by virtue of the formal elements of their works, both writers find themselves part of a ‘mobilise[d] . . . vast, complex congregation of voices’.²⁷

One of the things that makes this book so valuable is the light it brings to its selected writers. There are essays on the Pasifika novelist, poet, and playwright Albert Wendt, the Australasian Eve Langley, Australians Harry Holland, Henry Lawson, Mary Gilmore, Amanda Lohrey, and Dorothy Hewett, and tangata Tiriti and tangata whenua writers Emily Perkins, Pip Adam, Elsie Locke, Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhare, and Alice Tawhai. This collection is McNeill’s ‘shadow canon’ of writers, ‘acknowledged but underappreciated’.²⁸

I might say, however, that I found McNeill’s introduction to the

24 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 146.

25 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 160.

26 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 160.

27 This is McNeill quoting from Hone Tuwhare’s poem ‘Tangaroa: Sea-food Provider’ in *Forms of Freedom*, 101.

28 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 53.

essays unsatisfying; it reads as hasty and dismissive and, as I've suggested above, the book's key ideas (form, freedom, and socialism) receive only the lightest treatment. Fortunately, the book's essays more than make up for this shortfall. The essay on Eve Langley is a fair example. As McNeill compellingly argues, Langley makes 'writing itself a form of queer freedom and her trans texts write themselves into visibility by developing a system of citations and cross-references through which [the character] Steve's existence becomes legible and negotiable on Steve's own terms'.²⁹ Here, by way of a formal consideration—'citation'—the tension between individual ('Steve's own terms') and collective (all the voices represented in those citations) expresses the significance of form. McNeill's method consists in showing how a text bares the principles of its construction, and in the process offers a sense of the collective apparent in its composition; the novel's form in this case is also a lesson in reading for the collective. McNeill aptly describes Langley's work as 'an unfinished writing experiment', but as one reads the other essays in the book one soon gets a sense that McNeill's tastes are drawn to such a notion.³⁰ 'What', asks McNeill, 'might a reading practice become when it is incomplete?'.³¹ Indeed, the essays themselves, which taken together make of the book a kind of Benjaminian literary montage, seem self-consciously aware of themselves as fragments—contingent points of illumination—for a whole that cannot be expressed.

Though McNeill leaves readers largely in the dark about his theory of form, a deeper engagement with this much debated and theorised term reveals what is so promising about McNeill's literary criticism, if not also some of its limitations. I think we can be more specific here: McNeill's ideas about the practise of literary criticism, about literature, and more broadly about the creation and reception of cultural expertise in Aotearoa New Zealand, come down to how a notion of form might illuminate the event of the text as a kind of treaty.³² Our guides here are Derek Attridge and

29 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 55.

30 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 53.

31 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 13.

32 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 12.

Angela Leighton—both of whom have written so brilliantly about form and literary criticism. McNeill doesn't acknowledge either writer in his book, but their works inform his project.

For Attridge the text is always an event: a form, a kind of interaction, a moment of address between the text's presentation and its reception that remembers and repeats itself '*as a set of active relations*'.³³ Importantly, these relationships are *determined* (not simply free, as McNeill seems to suggest) by the specificities of the text's culture, its histories, its connections to time and place, and how they are addressed by the specificities inherent in every new creative and critical encounter with the text. To imagine form (to think *with* it) is not simply, as in a close reading, to imagine only the elements *within* a form (say, a poem or a novel) but, as Leighton reminds us, to imagine the contextual (historical, cultural, theoretical) *without*, or negative, that gives shape to and helps create and define the form. Form describes both object and relation. Leighton writes that form '[i]magined visually . . . looks two ways: to the shape it keeps in and the shape it keeps out', to the form itself *and* to the informing negative space of relation that defines it.³⁴ Benjamin thought of time in a similar way, where the experience of the present is the constellation of the 'now' and the 'what has been'; form then describes a kind of dialectic, a kind of treaty that can never be settled.

McNeill's brilliant essay on Emily Perkins's novel *The Forrests* provides us with such an image. McNeill is the only person to have read this novel as a dystopian text, a subtle science fiction, characterised by that genre's 'subjunctivity'.³⁵ As he shows, the novel presents us with a counter-future in which globalisation has not only changed what readers might have assumed to be the familiar present of the novel's narrative, but the 'novel's representation of the future [has] rearranged the significance of historical events from our own past. . . . [T]he past that post-colonial scholarship

33 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (Routledge, 2004), 68; original emphasis.

34 Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 16.

35 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 122, quoting Joanna Russ.

struggles to preserve has, in this universe, been erased'.³⁶ Thus, Perkins's novel offers readers a formal version of the 'negative', a brief moment of non-identity determined by its momentary collapse of time's progression. The experience the novel offers readers—the chance to meditate on a forgotten history that can only be represented formally in the negative—is now also our moment, 13 years after the publication of Perkins's novel, in which yet another conservative government has determined to forget history and culture. The negative, the darkness or obscurity of Perkin's novel, is thus history, the informing without of 'everything whole' across which the dialectical image flashes because of a form-oriented reading.³⁷ Such a dialectic reminds us how every form, whether a text, an object, an event, a human or non-human entity, contains its non-identity as part of its defining difference. McNeill makes use of Hegel to confirm his point: the ideal text, and perhaps also the ideal reading, is 'aware not only of itself, but also of the negative of itself, or its limit'.³⁸ In so far as form encourages us to think, as Hegel once put it, about the 'identity of identity and non-identity' (the bond of object and relation), form is critical method too.

To read critically and imaginatively with form, then, might also be to read as a 'custodian' of the text—to read for the collective forces both *within* and *without*, same and other, that determine the text. But '[w]hat does it mean to exist as a book's custodian?' It is a great question for McNeill to ask.³⁹ To think *with* the negative, and in that mode of 'non-identity' thinking so often associated with Adorno, is to think through form as a custodian. Not only does that word put us in mind of kaitiakitanga, but by conjuring the figure of the janitor (the 'custodian' who looks, as does Janus, in both directions at once, to the past and future, to 'what is kept in and what is kept out') McNeill reminds us that the work of literature is a form of labour to be respected for its expertise, just like any other kind of social work.⁴⁰

36 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 125.

37 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 27, quoting the writer Kelly Ana Morey.

38 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 105.

39 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 13.

40 Leighton, *On Form*, 16.

I must admit my deep affection for this position, and McNeill's invocation of the custodian—a figure of hospitality so familiar to me from my years of reading Derrida, arch-theorist *and*, please note, superb close reader—is powerfully compelling, so long, that is, as we stay faithful to the full implications of its role. The custodian should extend hospitality to the collective beyond its boundaries and at the edge of its paradigms and patterns, genres and forms, including those whose forms may challenge those of the custodian; this is, after all, the nature of the dialectic. By my reading, the custodianship on offer in McNeill's book, written under the imprimatur of his Marxist-humanism—a 'human power, which is its own end, the true realm of freedom'—may not be inclusive enough.⁴¹

Firstly, McNeill's humanism offers little consideration of how 'our' collective is informed and influenced by the larger collective of the non-human world. And yet to consider the agency of the non-human realm, the 'vibrant matter' of things as is stressed in new materialist and eco-critical accounts (modes McNeill might describe as theory-driven or contextualist), is to address notions like dominion, occupation, and property that in fact underwrite capital.⁴² No account of the collective, crucial to a theory of socialism, should exile the non-human world from its perspective, all the more so where one of your presiding concerns is the climate crisis, or where your Marxist-humanism is looking for kinship with te ao Māori. As Carl Mika explains, '[i]n a Māori worldview, things are not just passive entities awaiting construction by the self; they are instead animate and creative'.⁴³

Secondly, readers might also wonder who this custodian is hosting? To whom does McNeill-as-custodian imagine his method might speak, and speak for? 'A close reading' we are told 'should be too close for comfort', but there is nothing in the essays collected here for McNeill, or for a reader like me, reading from the left, to feel uncomfortable about.⁴⁴ Is this a problem?

41 Leighton, *On Form*, 12.

42 See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

43 Carl Mika, 'The Thing's Revelation: Some Thoughts on Māori Philosophical Research', *Waikato Journal of Education* 20 (2015), 63.

44 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 22.

I agree that ‘the critic-reader needs to risk a “dark unknowing” in their encounter with a text, but in that darkness we should find more than the ‘utopian’ and ethical otherness for which McNeill searches; we should also look for the Lacanian Big Other of power and ideology.⁴⁵ As Albert Wendt himself says (cited by McNeill): this dark immanence of the past and the dead may well be a ‘source of newfound pride, self-respect, and wisdom’ but it might also ‘destroy us’.⁴⁶

The same reading which finds a socialist possibility within the event of the text must also be one that, via form, reads the ambivalence of the text too; by the very logic of non-identity McNeill might have offered readings to show that texts, precisely because of their immanence, their ‘eventness’, are so complicated as to be in excess of progressivist readings, utopian readings, or readings that, with a particular programme in mind, seek to stress the social good of literature.⁴⁷ As Gillian Rose notes in *The Melancholy Science* (a book McNeill cites), ‘Adorno never specifies any particular goal of his “interventions”’.⁴⁸ I’m not sure the same can be said about McNeill’s time in the penumbral regions of his chosen texts.

In his description of the form an act of criticism might take, Derek Attridge argues that to respond ‘responsibly’ to a text as a critic

means producing a commentary that stages the act of reading it—not in the sense of reporting what happens as it is read, but of bringing out as far as possible in the writing of the commentary the singularity of the experience of reading for a given reader, a singularity that lies in its resistance to the very interpretative methods that give it its existence.⁴⁹

45 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 183.

46 McNeill, *Forms of Freedom*, 130.

47 Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, 70.

48 Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (Verso, 2014), 26.

49 Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, 118.

McNeill writes about resistance certainly, and he writes well—the essays are insightful, well-informed, and often stylish, and it is clear there is a lifetime of scholarship, of care, commitment, and compassion imbued in the pages of this book. And yet, the book doesn't appear to subject itself to the critical method it imagines; McNeill's book is like a shadowless book about the possibilities of shadows. As much as I admire and often agree with McNeill's readings, I do also feel a little haunted by that constituency, the vast and complex collective of readers and writers who, despite their political views, are part of the history of this book, but who receive no acknowledgement. *Forms of Freedom* is the work of a scholar on the left, reading texts belonging to a left tradition, by a methodology authored by the left, for an audience on the left, specifically, I take it, those that find themselves in McNeill's lecture rooms. I'm left to wonder about the strangers abandoned at the threshold. If to read and write from the left is to address and welcome the possibilities of the collective, as McNeill argues, and to do this in ways that go beyond the polarities of identity and non-identity (precisely what form and negative dialectics encourage) then does McNeill's presentation go far (left) enough?