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**Rewilding Form: Recent Approaches to Complexity in Literary Studies**

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Abstract:

The concept of “rewilding” has made its way into popular culture in recent years, describing a network of supporting the health of the environment and humanity itself through the cultivation of un-cultivated spaces within existing structures. This paper looks at recent cutting-edge works in literary criticism and theory to see how they handle this growing contemporary impulse to defer to wildness, ie. Complexity, as the “natural” form of cultural and biological processes.

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As with metaphors borrowed from computing and systems science, ecological metaphors have become useful and indeed popular as a way of approximately describing complex cultural processes for which terminologies are emergent. The practice is all the more prevalent as these cultural processes increasingly entail discussions of actual environmental concerns (for example in the domain of ecocriticism).[[1]](#endnote-1) Such is the case with the concept of “rewilding,” a term that has made its way into popular culture largely through its introduction in George Monbiot’s 2013 memoir *Feral*. [[2]](#endnote-2) Rewilding, which in a fundamental sense aims to support the health of the environment by restoring wild spaces, is a movement in conservation science that has become a social and cultural movement in latter years.[[3]](#endnote-3) This review is aimed at drawing out how three very different recent critical works on literary form—Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015); Matt Tierney’s *What Lies Between: Void Aesthetics and Postwar Post-Politics* (2015); and Lorri G. Nandrea’s *Misfit Forms: Paths Not Taken by the British Novel* (2015)—manifest common values and structural dynamics as well as other epistemological affinities with the rewilding movement. At the center of these commonalities, I believe, is a growing contemporary impulse to appreciate and defer to complexity as the “natural” form of cultural and biological processes.

Originating in the domain of conservation science, rewilding refers to a form of wilderness engineering—an effort to “restore big wilderness”—that can involve the reintroduction of key species, but also might happen through processes of, in effect, leaving nature to run wild.[[4]](#endnote-4) This is the opposite of the traditional conservation movement, which has sought to prevent existing wildlife in an area from disappearing or invasive species from establishing, in effect “freezing living systems in time.” Rather than trying to categorize and control an already profoundly in-process ecosystem in this way, rewilding respects the complexity of processes ongoing: rewilding, Monbiot writes, “recognizes that nature consists not just of a collection of species, but also of their ever-shifting relationships with each other and with the physical environment” and attempts to enact strategies that take unpredictable outcomes into account.[[5]](#endnote-5) Rewilding tactics take as a given a vast complexity of interacting processes, with interventions focused on rearranging elements in the dynamic system to encourage (bio)diverse ends; rewilding seeks to overturn the monocultural effects of human-imposed forms on the natural world.

In her introduction to *Forms*, Levine immediately broadens the discussion of form to include not just literary forms, social and political forms, but all forms: “Form,” she writes, “always indicates *an arrangement of elements—…* Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The aim of Levine’s book is to create from a convergence of insights from various fields a new formalist method, one that treats cultural products and processes as ordered by many forms (and their often contradictory logics) at any given moment. As such, her book is most interested in what does not cohere neatly to politico-theoretical discourse, as she places emphasis on social disorganization over organization, and “exploring the many ways in which multiple forms of order, sometimes the results of the same powerful ideological formation, may unsettle one another.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Levine discusses interactions of “unified” or whole forms, temporal forms (for example, social and artistic periods), hierarchical forms including bureaucracy and gender, and various forms of network (for example, the workings of the inter-state US postal system) in relation to the literary, demonstrating cultural ecologies of formal encounters and disruptions wherein no single strategy guarantees advancement of a particular formal process. According to Levine’s method, causal analysis is obsolete, as she convincingly argues for strategies that investigate the complex effects of arrangement and rearrangement in an expanded field of forms and an expanded field of relationships, in contrast to any application of a totalizing analytic framework.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Nandrea takes on a related project in *Misfit Forms*, engaging in what she terms “speculative reconstruction.” Nandrea’s method rests on close examination of the development of the English novel with special attention to that which was excluded—“roads less traveled, or divergences overshadowed by dominant trends”—which she uses to present alternative literary histories by tracing the effects of formal cultural ecologies.[[9]](#endnote-9) Quoting Darwin and drawing on Deleuzian “virtuality”, Nandrea projects arrangements that never happened, or “incipient species” that were in one way or another crowded out or extinguished by competing forms, through explorations of literary practices that never went mainstream, or that had a period of flourishing and promptly died out.[[10]](#endnote-10) The result is an illustration of the type of formalism Levine’s book calls for, a strategy of “nuanced understanding of the many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern social experience,” where Nandrea’s analysis takes the particular course of tracing extinct forms of construction and analysis within dominant literary history, raising possibilities of an unrealized set of outcomes that provide insight into the cultural present.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Tierney’s take on form, though very different, yet has some interesting things in common with both Levine’s and Nandrea’s approaches. Tierney’s *What Lies Between* discusses and critiques, as a basis, the so-called “post-political” phenomenon, suggesting that there is an opportunity to redefine or rewrite the post-political in a way that does not result in diminished expectations and goals for art and cultural processes.[[12]](#endnote-12) At the heart of this is the issue of form. Tierney explores what he terms *void aesthetics* in art and the literary*,* a thread he traces from post-WWI to the present, placing writers like Herman Melville and William Faulkner, alongside contemporary visual and filmic art, against a broad frame of philosophy, cultural and critical theory, to show how the aesthetics of “the void”—representing a break with both modern structure and postmodern fluidity—opens up possibilities for a truer post-politics.[[13]](#endnote-13) The aim of void aesthetics, Tierney argues, is to “keep the future open, uncommunicated, and undetermined,” and by doing so, to preclude structures that disallow genuine disruption.[[14]](#endnote-14) While this book takes a more heavily theoretical approach to the issue of form, his analyses chime with the authors above as an attempt to open up the category of form to include the excluded and uncategorizable, as well as being driven by an imperative of strategically managing the complexities of formal interactions (for example, “form and no-form,” “identity and non-identity”) more effectively in cultural discourse.[[15]](#endnote-15) Tierney’s void is yet another way of discussing the issue of systemic complexity in cultural terms; his void aesthetics evangelize the allowance of gaps in comprehension that redirect the need-to-know impulse down a path that is “specifically literary, to the degree that ‘literariness’ … pursues paradox”—the uncharted wilds of culture.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Over the last decades, Levine writes, “too strong an emphasis on forms’ dissolution has prevented us from attending to the complex ways that power operates in a world dense with functioning forms.” What we could describe as cultural ecosystems are organized by “multiple social, political, biological and aesthetic rhythms, each imposing a different order and following a different logic”—not unlike competing forms in natural ecosystems.[[17]](#endnote-17) “They do not work together,” Levine continues, “and so in the end are not able to impose a single coherent order on experience.” As such, Levine’s new formalism lets nature, or the nature of culture, decide: her method disposes with conventional analytic structures that impose unnatural order and occlude complex realities of forms that are “plural and colliding, jumbled and constantly altered.”[[18]](#endnote-18) In a similar vein, Tierney describes void aesthetics as a sort of alluvial muck of cultural evolution, “where fleeting contact could occur among political identities, or between media, that had not yet cohered into their later institutional and ideological forms” and yet “had already begun to degrade.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Tierney’s void aesthetics is, like Monbiot’s approach to rewilding, a method of unfreezing the garden, or as he puts it (quoting James Purdy on post-politics), reanimating “a nation of frozen jelly-fish.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

To thaw the ground for meaningful analysis and production, Nandrea, Tierney and Levine offer approaches that are different in style and tone but philosophically similar, in that each looks to the uncultivated or unmade space for a sample of the complex—cultural wildernesses, so to speak. For Tierney, Purdy’s nation of frozen jellyfish gives way to a state of blankness, the void—its terms developed with respect to discourses begun by Lacan, Poirier, Adams—representing “a kind of negativity that is elusive and relational rather than ideal or absolute.” The void is entirely fertile, a space of pure possibility.[[21]](#endnote-21) Void aesthetics are thus presented as a substrate or medium for cultural production, a condition that is definitely postwar and owed, in one sense, to the destructions of war.[[22]](#endnote-22) This unmaking of cultural spaces has something in common with the “accidental rewilding” that Monbiot describes in a 2015 essay of the same name, wherein once highly cultivated or developed areas—former urban areas and farmlands—“human dispossession and war [have] cleared the ground for nature to return.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Focusing on the return, Nandrea discusses the void aesthetic in terms of the invitation or latency of what might fill the cleared ground. In the performative text, she writes, “[t]he blank space … seems to open onto gesture … a want-to-move.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Levine poses a similar logic in her use of the design term “affordance” as a foundational element of her new formalism, where affordances refer to latent capabilities that forms might or could have. As possibility, a primary consideration of formal affordances—the opposite of all potential constraints—places form in a fertile relationship to cultural space, characterized by, in the first instance, blank or latent possibility.[[25]](#endnote-25)

In effect, the ground zero of cultural break, represented by postwar destruction or even the wake of violent encounter with (one’s) nature can result in a fertile opening for life. In Nandrea’s analysis of *Jane Eyre* this plays out when Jane’s confronts her past in the form of Thornfield house, overcome by finding it fallen to disrepair and overtaken by the landscape around it: “The lawn, the grounds were trodden and waste: the portal yawned void,” Brontë writes, “…. And there was the solitude of death about it, the solitude of a lonesome wild.”[[26]](#endnote-26) The blank response to an event is not teleological nor aimed at the mastery of knowledge in the scientific or even the moral sense. [[27]](#endnote-27)At this moment, Nandrea argues, Jane’s encounter with the wild “erases her position [and] erodes her … mastery,” her “stationary gaping” of wonder and awe a response to the comprehending/not comprehending of vast scale—the real nature of complexity. [[28]](#endnote-28) Brontë illustrates a moment of breakage in which, Nandrea argues, the implications of the narrative vastly outrun the narrative’s ability to contain them; this must be what Levine refers to as the “narratively networked sublime,” a fissure that allows a verdant burst of growth to occur in both Jane and in the novel.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Levine, Nandrea and Tierney each posit and/or demonstrate modes of critical reform, where current academic forms are not equipped to adequately express or critique a realistic depth of complexity. Levine argues that “we need a different model from the familiar container of the historical context to organize the work of cultural analysis” and makes a compelling case for the “eccentric claim” that the new formalism required might look something like the television series *The Wire*.[[30]](#endnote-30) This show, which has garnered considerable scholarly interest since its arrival in 2002, “conceptualizes social life as both structured and rendered radically unpredictable” (ie. complex) “by large numbers of colliding social forms …. it refuses to posit a deep, prior, metaphysical model of causality to explain its world.” This, Levine argues, that should serve as a model for new literary and cultural studies scholarship.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Both Tierney and Nandrea make related arguments concerning representations of complexity; Tierney also mentions *The Wire,* arguing that the show operates with a “vision of post-political experience”, a re-posing of experience with emphasis on the incapacity—not necessarily the unwillingness—of individuals to comprehend the big picture.[[32]](#endnote-32) Nandrea raises the issue differently, with a focus on “cumulative plotting,” as used by Dafoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (for example), whereby the novel coheres based on stylistic effects of continuity and cohesion rather than the teleological structure of *beginning-middle-end*. With cumulative narratives, Nandrea writes, “one can simply continue by adding more adventures, more links in the chain.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Arguably this form has returned, albeit in a different form: serial television.[[34]](#endnote-34) Serialized television might be aligned with the direction of contemporary analysis, Levine argues, precisely because “it has hours and hours to unfold relationships,” to add more links to the chain.[[35]](#endnote-35) That is, *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Wire* may reflect life more accurately in form, where the plot, subverting climax, subverting closure, “focuses our attention on … rhythms of replication and substitution that stretch forward and backward in time rather than on moments of dramatic change or rupture.”[[36]](#endnote-36) The cumulative plot allows some semblance of complexity to be represented without, at least, temporal truncation; emphasis on the limitations of narrative to accurately depict systemic complexity is built right into the form itself.

The methods of each of these authors, and rewilding itself, play on an interaction of interventionist and non-interventionist doctrines, intervening in order to stop other forms of intervention, to allow complexity to flourish and at the same time having a key ethical, almost moral component of wanting complexity to be understood as positive in itself. The end result is intended to be a rich but unromanticized realism, where the only qualifier of big wilderness is genuine (bio)diversity, without value judgements on what that diversity contains in particular. Rewilding methods don’t enact linear logic, but rather hinge on expressions of compound truths and the basis accumulation of content or matter over time, with momentum generated by the system itself, not an external reading of it. In critical analysis, we should expect new methods that are emphatic concerning what is “relational, situational, flexible and multiple”—a complex approach to cultural forms.[[37]](#endnote-37) In narrative, we can expect to see characters who understand network dynamics to be “sympathetic, even heroic,” “epistemological and ethical exemplars” who understand the social more accurately than the rest.[[38]](#endnote-38) The loss will be, perhaps, one of identity; without teleological and cause-based frames for comprehending our various realities, how will we define individual purpose? “The void,” Tierney writes, “leaves identity in a shambles, but it is a shambles that might be mobilized and put to use … The void shows postwar, post-politics, and consensus to be instrumental myths. And the void shows how the scandal of the status quo may be reordered, aesthetically, so long as it remains in disorder.”[[39]](#endnote-39) As for rewilding ourselves, there is an implicit suggestion that while the accoutrements of conventional individualism could wane, there is an awakening to be had in comprehending the sublime complexity of the world as it is. Monbiot has made a number of influential arguments that rewilding does the same job inside as outside: clearances, violences, introductions of unexpected or extinct species disrupt the deadening force of status quo operations, unfreeze social and cultural modalities, erase monoculture with a “fiercer, less predictable ecosystem,” and—like the rewilding of critical analysis—address the complexity of life with adventure and contemplative depth.[[40]](#endnote-40)

1. For example, on global-territorial crises related to both natural resources and media ecologies, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. George Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* [electronic edition] (London: Penguin UK, 2013). Monbiot, is a zoologist and environmental columnist for *The Guardian,* as well as author of a number of books on the subject of ecology and conservation. *Feral* won the 2013 Thomson Reuters Award for Communicating Zoology and the 2014 Society of Biology Book Award. Monbiot was also a recipient of the UN Global 500 award for outstanding environmental achievement, presented by Nelson Mandela. His influential 2013 “Manifesto for Rewilding the World” makes an impassioned argument for an approach to nature that is “about abandoning the Biblical doctrine of dominion which has governed our relationship with the natural world” in exchange for what he terms “positive environmentalism.” George Monbiot, "A Manifesto for Rewilding the World" *The Guardian* (2013). The website *ReWild.com* (2013) defines rewilding as “revers[ing] the process of domestication” and, for humans, “to return to a more wild or self-willed state.” The philosophy of restoring ecological diversity to humans as well as environments is based on the writings of ecologists and anthropologists including E. O. Wilson and Spencer Wells. See <http://rewild.com>. See also David Foreman, *Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2004); Michael Soule and Reed Noss. "Rewilding and Biodiversity: Complementary Goals for Continental Conservation," *Wild Earth* 8 (1998): 18-28. George Monbiot, “Accidental Rewilding,” *Aeon Magazine*, 2013. Accessed at <http://aeon.co/magazine/science/george-monbiot-rewilding/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The website *ReWild.com* (2013) defines rewilding as “revers[ing] the process of domestication” and, for humans, “to return to a more wild or self-willed state.” The philosophy of restoring ecological diversity to humans as well as environments is based on the writings of ecologists and anthropologists including E. O. Wilson and Spencer Wells. See <http://rewild.com>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also David Foreman, *Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2004); Michael Soule and Reed Noss. "Rewilding and Biodiversity: Complementary Goals for Continental Conservation," *Wild Earth* 8 (1998): 18-28. George Monbiot, “Accidental Rewilding,” *Aeon Magazine*, 2013. Accessed at <http://aeon.co/magazine/science/george-monbiot-rewilding/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Monbiot, loc 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 202015), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 17-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lorri G. Nandrea, *Misfit Forms: Path Not Taken by the British Novel* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Levine, 18. Nandrea, 3. The incipient species or forms that Nandrea traces include, for instance, direct relationships between typology and affect in *Jane Eyre*, an alternative plotting structure in *Robinson Crusoe*, and the functions of wonder and negative capability in novels by Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Nandrea, 6. On Deleuze’s concept of the virtual, see *Difference and Repetition, Nietzsche and Philosophy,* and *Foucault*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Matt Tierney, *What Lies Between: Void Aesthetic and Postwar Post-politics* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 3-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 165-170. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Levine, 9; 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 81. This really suggests cultural studies coming more into line with certain scientific disciplines, not the other way around. Those who study complex systems are accustomed to accounting for complexity and emergent, unpredictable phenomena that change over space and time. See Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin*, The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time: A Proposal in Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Tierney, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 124-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Monbiot, “Accidental Rewilding.” [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Nandrea, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Levine, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre [1847] (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 449. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Nandrea, 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 103. Nandrea doesn’t elaborate to this extent, but upon he discovery of Thornfield in this state, Jane is driven to find Mr. Rochester’s new place of residence, a house set quietly “in the heavy frame of the forest,” what is described as “a desolate spot” where “the pattering rain on the forest leaves was the only sound audible in its vicinage. ‘Can there be life here?’” Jane asks. At this point Rochester appears (at which point, on the violently cleared and rewilded ground, Jane’s life begins anew). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Levine, 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 67; 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Tierney, 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Nandrea, 125-141. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 111-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Levine, 132-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 136. Levine writes,

I draw from Derrida’s claims about the iterability of the sign—necessarily repeated across time, without origin, and capable of breaking with any single context—the suggest that institutional forms such as enclosures or rituals or kinship relations, repeated across different contexts, do not begin anywhere in particular, their sites of origin receding into ever more distant pasts (p. 63).

See also Nandrea, 141 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Tierney, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Levine, 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Tierney, 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Monbiot, *Feral*, loc. 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)