

MARIELLE MACÉ AND THE POLITICS OF FORM

ADRIAN TUDURACHI*

Abstract For nearly two decades, Marielle Macé has been working on the formal aspects of literature. Her reflections have focused on genres, reading, style, migration and ecology, while remaining steadfastly anchored to a “formalist” vocabulary, encompassing literary forms, the formal framework of language, as well as the formalities of existence – social gestures and postures, or the protocols of interactions, including those with animal behaviour. Two pivotal aspects emerge from an analysis conducted on Marielle Macé’s approach. The first concerns the ability of contemporary formalism to reorient itself in response to questions about the subject, the community and society. The second point calls into question the shift from moral reflection on form to ecological reflection. This transition entails tracing the reorientation of form and the rearrangement of its properties within new ideological contexts that discuss the relationship with the environment and with nature.

Keywords Marielle Macé, formalism, literary forms, politics of nature, Bruno Latour.

1. The stakes of a contemporary formalism

For almost 20 years, Marielle Macé has been working on the formal dimension of literature. Constantly renewed, her reflections have focused on genres, reading, style, migration and ecology, while remaining firmly attached to a “formalist” vocabulary. This is a vast field of form, encompassing literary forms, the formal framework of language, as well as the formalities of existence – social gestures and postures, or the protocols of interactions, including those with animal behaviour. Marielle Macé emphasised the operative significance of literary form across a remarkably diverse spectrum of fields, including aesthetics, anthropology, social sciences, and ecology.

* “Sextil Pușcariu” Institute of Linguistics and Literary History, Cluj-Napoca.

The Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca Branch.

adrian.tudurachi@acad-cj.ro.

ORCID: 0000-0002-7595-9289.

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This dedication is intricately tied to political thought, as it is expected to rationalize the interest in formal aspects, given their impact on individual conduct, on the formation of collectives and on interactions with other lifeforms. Several facets contribute to this political dimension. Firstly, since 2007, France has been engaged in a wide-ranging debate on the social role of literary studies.¹ In this context, "politics" means the justification of literature in relation to inquiries originating from outside the diverse fields, such as education, society, and economics. This shift has led to a pragmatic reevaluation of language and forms, emphasizing their capacity to elucidate the social dynamics governing literary configurations, both as practices and in their usage. Secondly, it concerns the involvement of forms in issues that are distinctly political: the social constitution of the subject, the concept of the common, the representation of marginal voices (migrants, nature). From this point of view, Marielle Macé's writings are characterized by a shift between two sets of questions. In her first works, she questions the engagement of forms in areas not usually claimed by politics, belonging to the realm of what Giorgio Agamben² called "pure means", i.e. the repertoire of gestures and the moral bifurcations they entail. Later, Marielle Macé's intellectual focus shifted towards the intricacies of participation within the political sphere. Envisioning the engagement of form in the "distribution of the sensible"³ implies a focus on the subjects of *voice* and *speaking out*. This movement, which simultaneously focused on the voices of the deprived and the voices of the non-human, was particularly fuelled by the contact with ecological ideas and the discovery of the "speech prosthesis of the nonhumans,"⁴ facilitate the articulation of the instances of nature.

It seems to me that there are two focal points worth considering in exploring this path. The first pertains to the adaptability of contemporary formalism in addressing inquiries about the subject, the community and society. What form, and above all what textual and linguistic properties, possess the capacity to engage in dialogue with anthropological, social and political thought? This kind of politicized formalism is a particular means of approaching the text, a way of recovering concepts and devices. It implies the revival of a knowledge of literary form, mainly from the French school of thought, subject to displacement and new questioning. In other words, we are witnessing a migration of formalism – "travelling formalism" – involving changes of value and object. The second point calls into question the shift from moral reflection on form to ecological reflection. This entails tracing the realignment of form and the reconfiguration of its attributes within new ideological contexts that discuss the relationship with the environment and with nature.

¹ Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2007), 23-4.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End. Notes on Politics* [1996], trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London – New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to bring the Sciences into Democracy* [1999], trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 68.

2. “What a form is capable of doing”

In a 2014 interview, Marielle Macé summed up her preoccupation with the formal dimension of literature as follows: “c’est prioritairement aux formes littéraires que j’ai cherché à restituer leur valeur existentielle, anthropologique, ou sociale; autrement dit, c’est à tout ce que peut une forme, *in fine*, que je m’intéresse.”⁵ The assertion “what a form is capable of doing” is central to this line of thought. It indicates the impact of form on the existence of individuals, communities or society. Nevertheless, we need to clarify the regime of this “power”, i.e. the mechanisms that ensure the involvement of forms beyond the confines of the literary text.

In an anthology of theoretical texts published in 2004,⁶ as well as in a 2006⁷ collective volume, the word that identifies the social life of forms is *pragmatics*. The phrase “pragmatics of genres”⁸ was used at that time. Subsequently, in 2011, a further reflection was integrated into the framework of a “pragmatics of style”.⁹ What defines the program of this pragmatics is an analysis of uses that challenges an essentialist interpretation of forms: “la généricité définit davantage une médiation, un «lire comme», que l’identité d’un texte.” The aim is not the “nature” of forms, but a “relationship” with forms, understood as practice, recovery and use: “Adoptons une vision pragmatique des genres, en posant d’abord la question générique en termes de fonctions et de pratiques.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, this is not a sociology of the uses of literary forms. While the term “function” is used here to describe the non-essentialist perspective, it should be approached with caution. For Marielle Macé, the “power” of forms concerns two things: what a form can do, in terms of the activities that correlate with it, starting with reading practices, and what the individual or collective exposed to the emergence of a form is capable of doing. The position held by a form within the literary communication system, and in the interaction between producer and consumer, serves merely as the initial point of a much longer and entirely unpredictable trajectory determined solely by the parameters of the literary system. The power of the form is not determined by the repertoire of which it is a part: if there is a “function”, it is a minimal condition, almost implicit and insufficient to describe the effective action of the form. This is why the two meanings of “what a form is capable of doing” tend to become intertwined in Marielle Macé’s work. In defining the territory of this “pragmatics”, the practices of genre recognition¹¹ are complemented by the individual practices of a form, i.e. its transfer into a life – which require the “phenomenological”

⁵ Marielle Macé, “La lecture, les formes et la vie,” interview by Raphaël Baroni and Antonio Rodriguez, *Vox Poetica. Lettres et sciences humaines* (19 September 2014): <https://vox-poetica.com/entretiens/intMace.html> (accessed in November 2023).

⁶ Marielle Macé, *Le genre littéraire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

⁷ *Le savoir des genres*, Raphaël Baroni and Marielle Macé (eds.) (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

⁸ Baroni and Macé, *Le savoir des genres*, 9.

⁹ *Le style en acte. Vers une pragmatique du style*, Laurent Jenny (éd.) (Genève: MetisPress, 2011).

¹⁰ Baroni and Macé, *Le savoir des genres*, 9.

¹¹ Macé, *Le genre littéraire*, 23.

investigation of the encounter with forms: “Il faudrait faire une phénoménologie de la perception générique.”¹² Certainly, the acknowledgment of genres or styles does not equate to the identification of a program, formula, or prescription. To clarify the matters in question, Marielle Macé turns to Paul Ricoeur’s then-recent book (2004), which describes recognition as a journey, a transition from one active meaning to another, passive meaning, from the recognition of an object to the recognition of oneself and the other.¹³

Thus, form is interpreted not as a literary configuration engaged in a process of reception, but as the initiation of a particular trajectory. For Marielle Macé, conceptualizing this source of action is more accessible through the vocabulary of force rather than relying on a rhetorical language dedicated to capturing the nuances of literary forms. In an article published in 2011, *Le style comme force*,¹⁴ force is assessed from two angles: “la force de différenciation d’une forme, mais aussi la force d’attraction (de subjugation, de mobilisation, d’orientation) exercée par ce mouvement sur celui qui le perçoit, et par conséquent la capacité de cette forme à se laisser réapproprier.”¹⁵ The force of differentiation designates form as otherness, and thus marks the first step in the recognition scenario, namely distinction: “reconnaître quelque chose [...] implique le distinguer de tout autre.”¹⁶ The force of attraction describes the commitment to this difference. Marielle Macé often employs metaphors depicting this capacity for attraction, thus underlining both the fascination and the imperative to mobilize. The dynamic relationship thus established is essential. The form is an indication, an “orientation”, a direction to which the subject adheres by movement, carried by a “momentum”.¹⁷

“Si le style constitue bien le mouvement de généralisation d’une singularité, alors une œuvre ou une conduite dévoilent pour le sujet une «idée de forme», une force lancée dans les choses et réappropriable (une idée est une flèche lancée par quelqu’un. Et ramassée par un autre, disait Deleuze). C’est une autre façon d’en souligner l’ouverture actionnelle. L’activité du sujet consiste à s’engager (ou à résister à s’engager) sur cette piste stylistique – faite de cadres perceptifs, de directions motrices, de tracés de sens, modèles et contre-modèles, dynamismes à s’identifier, à relancer ou à écarter.”¹⁸

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance* [2004] (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 39.

¹⁴ Marielle Macé, “Le style comme force,” in *Le style en acte. Vers une pragmatique du style*, Laurent Jenny (ed.) (Genève: MetisPress, 2011), 151-70.

¹⁵ Macé, “Le style comme force,” 152.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 42.

¹⁷ This interplay between two dynamics is identified by “tact” (Macé, “Le style comme force,” 153), a central notion in the essay on style (Macé, *Styles*, 133-49). It provides the model for a moral collision on a reduced scale, made up of infinite minor adjustments, characteristic for the episodic and transitory debate made possible by the experience of form in Marielle Macé’s perspective.

¹⁸ Macé, “Le style comme force,” 158-59.

The resulting experience of form is represented graphically by the line¹⁹ and defined phenomenologically by its unfolding over time. Between the subject and the form, there is a companionship along a path, of which the – limited – duration becomes a fundamental dimension. To accept a form fundamentally means to accompany it in its difference, to learn about its otherness on the edge of experience, and to take time to appropriate it. In this manner, the uncovering and exploration of new temporalities emerge as a central theme in the encounter with form, threading through nearly all of Marielle Macé's reflections.²⁰

The notion of form, and its linguistic, textual and discursive particularities, directly respond to this representation of experience. Most of Marielle Macé's interpretations revolve around an archetypal form, the phrase, whose narrative unfolding is supposed to reflect the temporal dimension in direct correlation with the graphic representation of the line.²¹ Employing this metaphor draws upon the rich French tradition of imagining the phrase through robust polarities, such as those between closure and openness, or stability and tension.²² What Marielle Macé has retained from these traditions are ideas concerning the phrase as incompleteness,²³ to render the unpredictable, plural and highly disputed paths of the encounter with forms. The phrase represents the minimal compromise between a unit of language and the temporal dimension, capable of representing the punctual emergence of experience, and the momentary bifurcation of "orientations".²⁴ Even if other linguistic particularities are involved in the analysis of texts, the phrase remains dominant, with a singular quality of metaphorical extension. Marielle Macé, for example, speaks of phrasing both in life and in the flight of birds. It is indeed crucial to emphasize the allegorical function inherent in this naming device for forms. It is less important to identify the concrete potential of a form drawn from the rhetorical or poetic repertoire, than to indicate the phenomenological value it embodies, to make it carry – sometimes in spite of itself – an existential or social function.

¹⁹ "Avec les choses le monde fait des lignes: lignes de conduite, lignes de vie, pistes, départs, ouvertures de mondes" (Macé, *Nos cabanes*, 72).

²⁰ This can be found very early on, for example, in texts that elaborate a pragmatics of genres: "l'érosion a réintroduit le temps, et le sable – métaphore elle aussi éphémère, certainement – s'est remis à couler. Ce sont à chaque fois des expériences ou des événements qui requièrent le lecteur, le saisissent et l'inscrivent dans des trajets et des reprises: ce qui donne une direction à la lecture, ce qui l'inscrit dans un horizon historique et social, c'est le «savoir générique»" (Baroni and Macé, *Le savoir des genres*, 9).

²¹ "Toute configuration littéraire indique ainsi quelque chose comme une piste à suivre, un phrasé dans l'existant" (Macé, *Façon de lire*, 12).

²² Gilles Philippe and Julien Piat, *La langue littéraire. Une histoire de la prose en France de Gustave Flaubert à Claude Simon* (Paris: Fayard, 2009), 182-88.

²³ Philippe and Piat, *La langue littéraire*, 182.

²⁴ "L'échelle de la phrase, contrairement à celle du récit, autorise cette discontinuité d'une subjectivation jamais transformée en destin et pourtant contrainte, conduite, «informée»" (Macé, *Façon de lire*, 195).

If the phrase functions as the allegory of time and movement, grammar is the allegory of the action of form in life. The term, which appears frequently in Marielle Macé's writings, designates two things. Firstly, it marks the main source of this kind of formalism: the collection of the facts of language (poetic phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.). In the context of French cultural traditions, grammar stands in opposition to rhetoric and its inventory of forms.²⁵ More importantly, however, grammar – and this is its second meaning here – indicates the multiplicity of social language games. It is grammar that governs the form and its rules, that attracts the subject and involves the reorientation of its life. In this regard, Marielle Macé²⁶ cites Vincent Descombes' reflection on the "grammar of the self", which, in turn, invokes Wittgenstein's conceptualization of forms of life and language games:²⁷ a temporary and specific situation that allows reality, actions and subjects to unfold according to certain rules codified by language. A game we enter into is one we experience with each act of enunciation. Thus, we can understand a connection with linguistic pragmatics and the theory of speech acts, which make up the framework that defines the ability of forms to act in life. Even if Marielle Macé does not engage the linguistic bibliography of pragmatics, the action of literary forms is thought of in a way similar to a speech act, performed under particular conditions. It is a situation,²⁸ the outcome of a temporary encounter, wherein the subject exposes itself to a process of individuation and singularization, responding to the imperative of a form. From this point of view, the specific "act" performed by the literary form in the individual or collective life, positioned within the spectrum of speech acts documented by linguistic pragmatics (such as command, persuasion, request, etc.), is notably the assertion of a directed initiation. Thus, phrase and grammar, temporality and situation, are pairs of attributes that determine the ability of literary forms to act in life.

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In comprehending the political implications of this encounter with form, I must invoke the work of Caroline Levine, who concurrently reflects on the impact of literary forms on social existence. In a 2015 book, *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Networks*, the American author

²⁵ Gilles Philippe, *Sujet, verbe, complément. Le moment grammatical de la littérature française 1890-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

²⁶ Macé, *Façon de lire*, 203.

²⁷ Vincent Descombes, *Le complément de sujet. Enquête sur le fait d'agir de soi-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), 14-5: "Il a fallu accepter de procéder par la voie grammaticale (comment se sert-on de petits mots tels que «plus tard», «maintenant», «pas encore», «après», etc.?). Cette voie est qualifiée de grammaticale, non pas pour suggérer que la réponse est déjà donnée dans les manuels des linguistes, mais pour nous rappeler que les mots s'emploient dans un contexte et qu'on explique leur sens en les y replaçant: d'abord dans celui de la construction d'une phrase, ensuite dans ceux d'un «jeu de langage» pour l'emploi de cette phrase et d'une «forme de vie» pour la pratique de ce jeu de langage."

²⁸ Marielle Macé prefers to use the term "situation" to describe this involvement of an act in a language game: "La lecture, ici, dispose à ce que l'existentialisme a nommé une «situation»: une place dans le temps, une posture face à l'écoulement orienté des événements, et par conséquent une possibilité d'action" (Macé, *Façon de lire*, 104).

resolves the problem of the social action of literary configurations through an alternative conceptualization of power. “What a form is capable of doing” is defined in relation to the actions that a form enables through its inherent properties. Borrowing a term from design theory,²⁹ *affordance* (a forged word that designates the capacity of a material to enable certain operations), Caroline Levine defines the power of a form as its ability to move in time and space, to step outside its initial framework to support dynamics or behaviours, social structures or even institutions:

“Let’s now use affordances to think about form. The advantage of this perspective is that it allows us to grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms – both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space. What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet capable of doing? Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities. Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, “a moment’s monument”, while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. Forms are limiting and containing, yes, but in crucially different ways. Each form can only do so much.”³⁰

There is a strict correlation between what a form generates in the world and its specifications, between what it is capable of doing and the characteristic layout of its properties. The enclosure, the rhyme, the network, the sonnet do not have the same impact on society, nor do they support the same undertakings. The catalogue of forms is important in determining the potential of its achievements. We must also note that the concept of *affordance*, central to this interpretation of the power of forms, is one that crossed several fields before being claimed by literary studies. It has been used in design theory to name the constructive possibilities of materials, but was coined by J.J. Gibson, in an important work of ecological thought, to describe the close relationship between the environment and various forms of life. There is a correlation between what an entity can do, the repertoire of its actions, and the possibilities of its environment. Gibson calls a “niche” a global arrangement of the properties of an environment in direct relation to the possibilities offered by a life form:

“The different substances of the environment have different affordances for nutrition and for manufacture. The different objects of the environment have different affordances for manipulation. The other animals afford, above all, a rich and complex

²⁹ Don Norman, *The Design of everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 10-13.

³⁰ Caroline Levine, *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), 6.

set of interactions, sexual, predatory, nurturing, fighting, playing, cooperating, and communicating. What other persons afford, comprises the whole realm of social significance for human beings.”³¹

In this context, we can gain a deeper understanding of the implications of the possibility of action inherent to the forms in Marielle Macé’s conceptualizations. The most noticeable distinction lies in the position attributed to the inventory of forms. For the “affordance” approach, this inventory is rich and diverse, with differentiated practical effects for each shape. It also implies the predetermination of action, since what a form does can already be anticipated in its definition. Marielle Macé’s interpretation, however, reduces the repertoire of forms to the single phrase, opening up to the unpredictable. As in the case of linguistic pragmatics, which leaves the determination of the success or failure of an action entirely up to performance, the outcome of an encounter with a form cannot be anticipated; it remains completely under the sign of the unknown.

There is another difference to note. The forms envisaged by Caroline Levine tend to be defined as static configurations, as global devices, whose main dimension is spatial (indeed, forms such as whole or hierarchy directly illustrate this property). Marielle Macé, however, employs a linear definition of form, whose properties include temporality and orientation. In this sense, based on a reflection by Laurent Jenny, she develops the opposition between line-form and container-form: “au rebours des maniaques du contenant, vase, forme, mont, modelé du corps, vêtements, peau des choses (lui [Klee] déteste cela), cherchent loin du volume, loin des centres, un centre tout de même, un centre moins évident... Aventure d’une ligne.”³² The political implication of this choice is rather straightforward. Global form has the vocation of order. One of the interpretations inspired by Caroline Levine, that of Anna Kornbluh (*The Order of Forms. Realism, Formalism and Social Space*), sets out to demonstrate precisely this resource of formalism. It is not coincidental that the order of forms makes an early reference to Michel Foucault’s book *The Order of Things*,³³ the English translation of *Les mots et les choses*. From a political point of view, a radical opposition is drawn between individual adventure within a community engaged by the phrase, and state or institutional structure of control, made possible by the transfer of the order of a form to the social realm.

3. Politics of nature, politics of language

The visible reorientation of Marielle Macé’s work towards social, political and ecological critique³⁴ determines a significant change in the conception of the form. A conceptual

³¹ J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* [1979] (Routledge, 2014).

³² Macé, *Nos cabanes*, 74.

³³ Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms. Realism, Formalism and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 27.

³⁴ These are mainly writings published after 2017: *Sidérer, considérer, Nos cabanes, Une pluie d’oiseaux, Respire*.

framework, wherein the author assigns the ability of natural instances to express themselves, undergoes a transition from a metaphorical to a political application. This shift can be seen in the reassessment of a Francis Ponge poem, *Les hirondelles ou dans le style des hirondelles*,³⁵ in 2011 and 2022. The two interpretations, with a gap of over ten years between them, engage with the same textual element—the swallow—whose flight leaves a signature and thereby emanates an “idea”: “Chaque hirondelle inlassablement se précipite – infailliblement elle s’exerce – à la signature, selon son espèce, des cieux.” What changes is the acknowledgement of the ability of a “nonhuman” to “write or speak.”³⁶ In 2011, the swallow that makes the sign is a way of indicating the external nature of style, its presence in life, the fact of being available there, for the subject. The swallow's flight is merely the carrier of an attractive force: “la forme du vol, dans la suite du texte, relance et recharge cet élan qui m’appelle, m’étonne, m’entraîne et me déplace; j’ai plaisir à y répondre, à m’y réinventer, ce style est comme une variation attirante sur mon propre style.”³⁷ What counts in the reinterpretation of 2022 is the swallow's ability to be the source of its “idea” – the origin and the subject of its gestures and movements. “L’oiseau ici s’écrit, cela ne fait aucun doute, c’est dit: il s’écrit et trace sa forme d’être dans le ciel comme une phrase, et revient à son fil pour passer à la ligne.”³⁸ Here, the ability to “write oneself” is no longer a metaphor projected by the eye of the dreamer gazing at the sky, but is based on political status, on recognition as a “social actor endowed with consciousness, speech, will, and intention.”³⁹ The re-interpretation of the text involves the assumption of legitimacy and rights⁴⁰ correlated with the act of speaking. Stepping out of metaphor and into the world is the central concern of this rereading of Ponge's poem: “Le poème devient une lutte avec et contre son langage pour mieux être du

³⁵ Macé, *Façon de lire*, 10-2; Macé, *Une pluie d’oiseaux*, 240-43.

³⁶ Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 66.

³⁷ Macé, *Façon de lire*, 12.

³⁸ Macé, *Une pluie d’oiseaux*, 243.

³⁹ Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 73.

⁴⁰ The question of rights is central to the essay on migration (Macé, *Sidérer, considérer*, 36-39), as a means of recognizing the juridical status of a marginalized population. From the point of view of the relationship to forms, this social reality implies the same device as the instances of nature: autonomous enunciation of an “idea” (in the sense of an orientation, often described by “phrase” or “song”) that requires attention and responsiveness on the part of the subject: “Prendre en considération ici ce n’est pas seulement regarder, même si ce n’est pas encore agir; c’est se mettre à l’écoute de l’idée qu’énonce tout état de réalité (car toute chose dit son idée, non pas l’idée que l’on a d’elle mais l’idée qu’elle est, autrement dit le possible qu’elle ouvre. [...]) Pour l’écrivain, cette considération se joue dans une rage d’attention et de qualification, une sorte d’effort très pongien pour qualifier patiemment ce «chant» entonné par chaque chose et phraser l’idée de vie que chaque chose par conséquent énonce, entonne” (Macé, *Sidérer, considérer*, 45, 61). In Marielle Macé's texts, social reflection and ecological reflection share a common support, determined by the relationship with forms in life. This shows the extent to which the politics here do not differ according to areas of life, but according to a formalist thought that is essentially linguistic and aesthetic.

monde, pour atterrir.”⁴¹ In short, we move from the free availability of an idea of style to the conditions of production and institution of this same idea. The gap between these two interpretations of Ponge's poem reveals the new politics of form in Marielle Macé's perspective. It determines the shift in focus, as well as the textual particularities. The form is no longer experienced primarily by a subject, through numerous bifurcations and moral deliberations; instead, the focus is on comprehending the emergence of other instances and the linguistic symptoms signaling their presence.

Drawing on Bruno Latour's reflections, I will briefly outline three aspects of the institution of these “politics of nature” that are important for this new representation of form. First of all, the suspension of the division between nature and society. Bruno Latour, who often presents this separation employing a vocabulary of conflict (“reciprocal disgust”⁴²), sees the broadening of the domain of voices that have access to the “collective” as a “progressive de-dramatization” and a “civil peace”.⁴³ This pacification involves both overcoming the opposition between fact and opinion, and diminishing the importance of the domain of passions and interests that delimit a subject's position in society. The second aspect concerns the unpredictable nature of the repertoire of actions available in this comprehensive collective. “The only thing that can be said about them is that they emerge in surprising fashion.”⁴⁴ This “surprise” refers to the emergence of the actors, to their condition, as well as to their conduct, unconstrained by necessity. Lastly, the indeterminacy of positions brought about by this extended dialogue. Broadening the participation in the collective does not mean democratizing the role of the subject, distributing it to instances of nature, but replacing the distinction between subject and object with a “range of uncertainties”,⁴⁵ where the attributes that indicate identity, self or source of enunciation are no longer fixed.

In Marielle Macé's work, these aspects correspond to several themes that organize the selection and interpretation of linguistic and discursive particularities. The most important imaginary framework revolves around surpassing the division between the human society and the realm of nonhumans: “conversation” and “response” are the terms used to describe the interaction between heterogeneous actors. The means of communication with the “new voices” is not one of polemic or debate, but rather that of echo and mimicry. One example of such a conversation is the bird flying and someone watching it, while discovering the potential for a mirrored gesture. “Les poèmes parlent volontiers du voir-voler: de notre admiration devant le vol, de l'espèce de conversation qui se noue entre le regard d'un homme et le mouvement d'un oiseau.”⁴⁶ The poetic and linguistic notions thus mobilized fall within the realm of sound imitation and prosodic repetition. “La rime, la strophe et leurs retours, ce sont

⁴¹ Macé, *Une pluie d'oiseaux*, 243.

⁴² Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 73.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁶ Macé, *Une pluie d'oiseaux*, 60.

les institutions formelles (les décisions quant à la langue) qui déclarent ce grand chaînage du monde naturel.”⁴⁷ The illiteration phenomena and many sound suggestion devices⁴⁸ are also part of the same series, as are “murmurs”, “whispered, low-noise phrases”⁴⁹ etc.

The second theme is that of the “apparition”, which represents the sudden emergence of the actors of these new collectives, and connotes the suspension of explanatory categories: “L’émerveillement, l’admiration, la stupéfaction, le saisissement, l’attrait, le désir: voilà en effet les émotions qui surviennent quand l’oiseau apparaît dans la vie d’un homme.” Given the formal features, the theme of apparition marks the transition from a linguistics centred on enunciation to a linguistics that is indifferent to the subject and its intentions. Within the architecture of language, we descend several floors, below the consciously controlled area of the speaker, to retain the signs of unconscious activity: “Ces émotions ont leur grammaire: celle de l’exclamation, sous ses formes lexicales ou syntaxiques (la ponctuation, la répétition, l’abondance, ou à l’inverse le mutisme, mais un mutisme adressé, souligné, qui s’expose: creusements prosodiques d’un j’ai été touché!)”⁵⁰ We must note that apparition involves the emanations of an unknown and unfathomable zone, which can be interpreted psychoanalytically. It is in this sense that the essay *Respire* proposes a new ideal of communication, as a close and secret exchange, following the model of the conspiracy within the realm of dreams.⁵¹

Finally, the third aspect of this politics of nature is represented by the figures of the “atmospheric” presence. As an image that points to the uncertainty of positioning, the atmosphere implies a negotiation between subject and environment, as well as the fluidity of ontological conditions: “Vous n’êtes ni tout à fait l’agent ni tout à fait le patient mais le milieu de cet échange avec le milieu, à la fois ou tour à tour concerné, compromis, traversé,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁸ There are several reflections based on the presence of the sound *f*: “J’aime beaucoup entendre Barbara Cassin rappeler que la langue grecque appelait les vivants du beau mot de *phôs* (venu de *phuô*, «pousser, croître», comme *phusis*, la «nature»), qui à un accent près (et lorsque les accents n’étaient pas fixés) désigne aussi la lumière, et se rapporte au *ph-* de l’expir, du bruit que fait l’air quand on parle, du souffle signifiant qui sort de la bouche, du «dire» donc, *phêmi*. *Ph-*, où s’entend aussi le *f-* du *fari*, du *fallar*, de la *fabula*, du *souffle* et du *souffleur*, et le *h-* en pure expiration de l’*hablar*. *Phôs*, *phôta*, les vivants: ces lumineux, ces allumés, ces respirants qui tiennent et se tiennent par la parole...” (Macé, *Respire*, chap. *Breathe in/Speak out*).

⁴⁹ Macé, *Une pluie d’oiseaux*, 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 91.

⁵¹ Macé, *Respire*, chap. *Respirer, conspirer*. Marielle Macé quotes Stéphane Bouquet as follows: “Pourtant, «il y a une cache de douceur au fond du langage», et c’est «notre seule raison de parler». Parler c’est dire ce que l’on a à dire, oui, au grand air et à beaucoup d’autres, mais c’est aussi tenter de «suivre la bête douceur jusqu’à son territoire sous les signes, jusqu’à son nid dans les visages, jusqu’à l’endroit secret où la bête sait qu’il faut qu’elle se cache et où elle attend pourtant d’être débusquée. Où toute sa patience est attendue, et elle respire exprès trop fort de crainte de passer inaperçue.»”

encombré, rouvert, délivré, dilaté...”⁵² The corresponding linguistic devices are identified in structures that determine the neutralization of action and its responsibility: the “middle voice”,⁵³ i.e. conjugation where “un sujet rejoint un verbe dans la clairière du sens,”⁵⁴ and in general, any movement of “élargissement des paroles.”⁵⁵

Beyond these webs of metaphors that mobilize textual properties, the continuity of the vocabulary is noteworthy. It is still grammar and the phrase that describe the linguistic undertaking in a new politics of form. Nevertheless, what they represent is essentially a function of mediation between heterogeneous instances: prepositions, syntactic bonds, or simply the ability to connect words within the same phrase. In this way, the phrase becomes a device for articulating words and things: “Ce qui se met à compter, ce sont moins les mots qui nomment les choses que les phrases qui les mettent en rapport;”⁵⁶ moreover, grammar is seen as a repertoire of means for establishing links: “elle a aussi besoin d’une grammaire, pour ne pas se précipiter sur l’énoncé d’un grand et vague entrelacs mais s’employer à qualifier des relations.”⁵⁷ In other words, the meaning of the two terms coincides. This is perhaps the most striking difference compared to their use in Marielle Macé’s early texts. The distinction between the adventure of the phrase and situations governed by grammar no longer exists: the function of the two concepts is to mobilize the low-level resources of language – phonemes, syllables, morphemes, words and connectors – in order to conceive of a communicative situation without the presence of the subject. We thus find ourselves already a long way from pragmatics, as well as from the event-driven nature of the existential path shaped by the encounter with forms.

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This examination of literary forms highlights, first and foremost, a question of vocabulary. We see a way of thinking whose mobility closely follows current issues concerning the subject, social marginality or ecological participation in the environment. Moreover, we cannot help wondering about the extent to which the vocabulary of forms supports this dynamic of literary questioning. There is a deficit of formalist conceptualization in relation to the relevance of literature, which has never ceased to widen and bend to new realities. A dissymmetrical dynamic seems to emerge from Marielle Macé’s reasoning: the extension of the domain of formalisms, on the one hand, and the narrowing of formalist vocabularies, on the other. Formalism responds to the complex and difficult demands of the contemporary debate with an uncertain repertoire – and the many struggles against rhetoric, poetics and stylistics have not helped either. From this point of view, there are two concerns. One has to do with the source – where do we draw our inventories from, where do we find the forms we qualify and mobilize

⁵² Macé, *Respire*, chap. *Participation*.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Macé, *Une pluie d’oiseaux*, 70.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 245.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 244.

in a debate? The other is about the univocity of meaning. Rhythm, rhyme, grammar, phrase – are we truly in accord regarding their values?

The second question concerns the politics of form. What is the purpose of literary formalism in the contemporary context? And to what overarching idea does it contribute? We have seen that the same inquiry into “what a form is capable of doing” ends up supporting the individual journey and its openness, the generous deployment of possibilities, as well as the often-restrictive institutional order. This equivocal commitment is compounded by the fact that, through the discovery of extended collectives, this reflection tends to miss the event dimension of the relationship to forms. Is there emancipation without an event? Georges Didi-Huberman, who reflected on the possibility of uprising and revolt through forms, recalled Aby Warburg's preoccupation with the “suppletive function” of language: a conceptualization that describes the association between the change of a verbal root and the increase in the degree of a comparison.⁵⁸ This correlation between the modification of form and the intensification of meaning is meant to describe the mechanism of the survival of forms in the history of art: the revival of forms is the sign of an affection, of a pathos that continues to intensify. Yet, it is this intensity, marked by the change of form, that opens the way to a return into the future and, by the same token, opens the way to hope. In a world of repetition, murmur and mimicry, driven by conversation with the new voices of nature, is it possible to maintain such an emancipatory aim?

⁵⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, “Aby Warburg et l’archive des intensités,” *Études photographiques* no. 10 (November 2001): 144-68.