

contemporary debates about the concept, even though it deliberately does not intervene in them.

Matthew Beaumont

*On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* by Angela Leighton. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. x + 288 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-929060-4. \$65.00; £32.00.

“Form,” for Angela Leighton, is a word with a history and a process of perception. As much as any twenty-first-century book can be, *On Form* is a counterpart to Walter Pater’s writings on aestheticism, for Leighton both considers aestheticism and enacts it in her luminous prose. Since form cannot be itself and simultaneously fixed as an object of study, Leighton’s method consists of a series of essays understood both as sequential compositions and as contingent inquiries into the relation of form and content, embodiment and abstract principle. To extend the Paterian analogue further, Leighton’s aesthetic inquiry comes into being under specific conditions, its truth relative to its moment of formation. Those conditions include the hermeneutics of suspicion applied to concepts of beauty or high art generally, and more specifically the influence of Terry Eagleton’s *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Walter Benjamin’s contention that the end point of art for art’s sake was Nazism, and Theodor Adorno’s insistence that to write a poem after Auschwitz was an act of barbarity. Leighton defends aestheticism against the charges of indifference to ethics, politics, and humanity by repeatedly probing nineteenth- and twentieth-century instances of art for art’s sake that turn out to unfold in the context and often against the pressure of palpable human bodies and history. Art, Leighton maintains, is “nothing but” form, yet human too.

Her first five chapters most immediately bear on nineteenth-century aestheticism and its legacy, while later chapters are devoted to Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, W.S. Graham (best known for *The Nightfishing*, 1955), and elegies by Paul Muldoon, Geoffrey Hill, Roy Fisher, Anne Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath. Leighton’s first chapter, “Form’s Matter: A Retrospective,” subsumes definition under a narrative