

## REVIEWS

*The Burden of Rhyme: Victorian Poetry, Formalism, and the Feeling of Literary History* by Naomi Levine. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2024. 255 pp. ISBN: 9780226834962. \$115.00.

Over the years, literary criticism has devised many bridges in an attempt to span the historicist-formalist divide. Yet the gap continues to yawn: you might even say our profession needs it. Naomi Levine's sparkling new book pursues a different tack. Rather than contrive a *via media* between our contemporary contentions, she returns us to a prior time in which there was no divide, and then argues, more controversially and more persuasively still, that the very perception of an unbridgeable gap between form and history constitutes a critical misprision, a failure to reckon with the origins of our own discipline. One of the many virtues of *The Burden of Rhyme* lies in how it might enable us to disagree more productively in future.

Why is the formalist-historicist disagreement a non-problem? Levine leads us back from the twentieth century, where such oppositions calcify, to a tradition of the long nineteenth century, which is capacious, cosmopolitan, yet also coherent. Her felicitous umbrella term for this intellectual constellation – genetic formalism – includes such thinkers as Thomas Wharton, Johann Gottfried Herder, Arthur Hallam, and Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi, who, *mutatis mutandis*, believed that to do literary history was to *feel* it. In lieu of a detached historiographic vantage that was in any case yet to take shape, this unorthodox philological tradition enjoined the historian's sympathetic self-projection into the periods that she surveys. The distinctively modern practice of rhyme proves exemplary in this quest: for the verbal echoes that structure so much Victorian poetry do not only answer one another at line-ends but also chime with a large prehistory that includes Provençal chanson, Italian canzoni, and Arab verse. The empirical water-tightness of this literary history matters less than its general claim: that to write rhyming verse is to touch a living tradition.

And yet, Levine continues, we have lost the ears to hear rhyme as both acoustic event *and* historical premonition. We have done so in large part because, from New Criticism onwards, the detection of formal features such as rhyme has become identified with an exclusive attention upon the text at hand, which knows no history and requires no context. From there, of course, it is a short step to the counter-reactions of new historicism. Yet *The Burden of Rhyme* claims persuasively that the New Critics were not committed to ahistorical formalism in any absolute sense. Rather, they took for granted –