

# Form and Its Meaning in the Creation of Art

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The twentieth century has witnessed very important changes in the creation of art and the development of its self-awareness in critical theory and literary criticism. Trends in contemporary art—the most typical of which is fine art—often recurred with novel manifestos and discoveries. In the field of Aesthetics the transition from the Beautiful to the Aesthetic, the return to the Sublime, in the Kantian spirit, has supported and given wings to the searches for many new but bizarre forms. Nevertheless, there seems to be here an interruption in the development of creation starting with the artist and ending with the audience. There is a vast distance between the former's novel discoveries and the latter's appreciation ability. Public taste, which is by nature conservative, now seems unable to catch up with the artist's restless creativity. It appears that the audience is tied in a certain paradigm of art appreciation which is not really compatible with the real essence of artistic creation and therefore prevents a thorough perception of the uniqueness, particularity, and appeal of art as well as the artist's talent. One of such limitations stems from the public's understanding of form and its meaning, as well as the relation between form and content.

To date the most common mode of art appreciation is limited to the understanding of content. Content is more important than form. Because content determines form, form changes when content changes. This simplistic understanding of the relation between content and form not only prevents an adequate comprehension of the complex relationship between content and form but also lowers the meaning of the artistic form, consequently causing a misconception of the nature of art in general. In fact, in art the relation between content and form is much more complicated, and art itself as well as its meaning is never simple. To understand this, an aesthetic sensitivity is not enough. It must accompany a broader view involving philosophy, based on the assumption that art is inseparable from life and from man's total development.

It is often said that in art form and content are intertwined and that content can transform into form, determine form, and “form is couched in content.” This concept of art is deep rooted in a philosophical and aesthetic tradition, particularly in Hegel's thought.

It was Hegel who first examined the pair Content and Form in a methodical manner. He writes: “[T]he content is not formless, but has *the form in its own self*, quite

as much as *the form is external to it*. There is thus a doubling of form. At one time it is reflected into itself; and then is identical with the content. At another time it is not reflected into itself, and then it is external existence, which does not at all affect the content” (*Encyclopedia* 288-89; emphasis added). According to Hegel, form can be content when, as pointed out above, it is “reflected into itself,” which is “the Law of the Phenomenon.” Even when it is not reflected into itself, when it is indifferent to content, “it is content itself except that it is a matterless, direct, and indifferent to the real one” (Bùi Văn Nam Sơn 532). That is the nature of form and content, hence “content is nothing but the revulsion of form into content, and form nothing but the revulsion of content into form” (*Encyclopedia* 289). Hegel calls this revulsion an “absolute correlation,” “one of the most important laws of thought.”

Hegel develops at length this notion of content and form in *Lectures on Aesthetics*. According to him, art, religion, and philosophy are the existent forms of the Idea in its various stages of development into perfection and ultimate essence. In art thought also has various types—“symbolic, classical, and romantic.” In Hegel's parlance these are “general types” or “universal forms of art.” These types of art when realized thanks to its various materials will be “a determinate form of art,” such as architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry. These forms are closely related to the Absolute Idea because they affirm the actual existence of artistic forms. Artistic form is no other than the expression of the Idea.

In his philosophical and aesthetic works Hegel develops his concept of form in the above meaning—that is, in the relation between form and content form is an absolute idea, not a factor in a work of art, nor a means through which content is expressed. “Every definite content determines a form suitable to it” (*Aesthetics* 16). Content not only determines forms, but it can be transferred to form. For Hegel, content and form are inextricably linked. “Content and artistic shape are fashioned in conformity with each other” (78). Because artistic defects can be derived from content, it is ideal if content and form conform with each other. The unity of form and content is a requirement for a work of art. “A work of art that wants the right form,” Hegel asserts, “is no right or true work of art” (*Encyclopedia* 289).

According to Hegel, the relationship between form and content exists in two ways. First, it affirms as a historical fact the existence of content in its stages of development. When Hegel alls Art, Religion, and Philosophy different forms of the Idea when he refers to Symbolism, Classicism, and Romanticism as general forms of art, he means to use forms of art used in that sense. Second, form is the *outside*, the visible part of content. This outside, however, is *not* different to content; rather, it is “an intelligent reflection” which *has the same nature as content and therefore is content* (emphasis added).

Hegel also views form in a different way. To him, form is not a representation of content but a means through which content is expressed. “The sensuous in works of

art,” he writes, “is exalted to the rank of a mere resemblance in comparison with the immediate existence of things in nature, and the work of art occupies the mean between what is immediately sensuous and ideal thought” (*Aesthetics* 43). This “thingness” in a work of art does exist because it is part of “the sensuous.” “Though the sensuous must be present in a work of art,” Hegel explains “it must only appear as surface and semblance of the sensuous.” (43). He emphasizes the perfection of technique as a requirement for a work of art. By way of illustration, Hegel explains why Goethe and Schiller emphasized the importance of form. Though these “men of genius were the first to give our nation works of true poetry, it was only their mature manhood that presented us with creations profound, substantial, and the outcome of genuine inspiration, while no less *thoroughly perfect in form*” (33; emphasis added).

Though Hegel speaks of “the external elements of form and medium” (89), that is, form as seen in accordance with the meaning and representation of content, he does not explicitly point out the nature of this type of form as well as its relation to content. This is easy to understand because Hegel was a philosopher, not an art theorist. Because Hegel viewed art from a philosophical standpoint, it was not a coincidence that he called his lectures on aesthetics “Philosophy of Art” or “Philosophy of the Creation of Art.”

It was the Russian Formalists who examined in depth this second meaning of form and issues related to form not as philosophers but purely as art critics. It is fair to say that Clive Bell was considered contemporaneous with—even a bit earlier than—the Russian Formalists. Just as the year 1914 was marked by the emergence of Russian Formalism with Viktor Shklosky’s speech titled *Vokreshenie slova* (The Revival of the Word) at a café in Saint-Peterburg, earlier in the same year Bell had published in London *Art*, a book that was to stir heated debates for a long time afterward.

In *Art*, Bell raises the question of what makes a work of art aesthetic. After observing various phenomena of art, especially sculpture, Bell comes to this conclusion: “[Only] one answer seems possible—significant form” (328-29). “When I speak of significant form,” Bell explains, “I mean a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that moves me aesthetically” (330). Further, he defines “significant form” as “arrangements and combinations that move us in a particular way” (332). According to Bell, “significant form,” not general form, distinguishes a work of art from a non-art of work in that at least it must meet these two requirements: first, it consists of lines and colors and the combination of these lines and colours; second, it must be able to stimulate special emotions that Bell calls “aesthetic emotions.” Aesthetic emotions differ from ordinary emotions in that they bring one into a different world where “the emotions of life find no place. It is a world with emotions of its own” (333). These emotions are created by the work’s form, not by the scenes described in the work or the ideas stimulated by our reading of it. For this reason, Bell advises us “to appreciate a work of art we need to bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space” (333).

But why is significant form capable of bringing us aesthetic emotions? According to Bell, significant form “moves us so profoundly because it expresses the emotion of its creator” (338). It is co-called not because this kind of form carries a certain meaning and contains a certain content or ideas as one had thought, but because it has a value of its own, and is capable of provoking an aesthetic emotion exuding from a condensed emotional energy that is pouring out of the tip of his pen. That is the difference between significant form and beautiful form. The wings of a butterfly can be very beautiful, but they do not stimulate an emotion akin to what a work of art provokes in us. “It [the wing of a butterfly] is a beautiful form, but it is not significant form. It moves us, but it does not move us aesthetically” (338).

Bell’s theory of form, especially his concept of significant form, has met diverse reactions, including strong criticisms. Noel Carroll (Monroe Beardsley), one of Bell’s major critics, calls Bell’s significant form “regrettably indeterminate.” “[Bell] has given us no way to discriminate between significant form and insignificant form,” Noel Carroll writes. What makes one juxtaposition of shapes significant, and another not? We have no way to decide. Thus, obscurity lies at the heart of formalism; the theory is useless, because its central term is undecided” (118).

Bell’s discussion of significant form was an important hit that contributed to the shaping and developing of a movement in Formalism that was to bloom in both artistic creativity and literary criticism and theory of the twentieth century. Bell’s theory of significant form can even be found in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. As Michael Kelly rightly observes, until now Bell is still seen as “an early architect of contemporary analytic aesthetics. His formalist theory of art has become one of the classics of the twentieth century philosophical aesthetic” (251).

Bell’s Russian contemporaries such as Shlosvsky, Boris Tomashevsky, Yuri Tynyanov, Roman Jakobson, and Vladimir Propp formed an art movement known in the history of aesthetics and literary criticism and theory as Russian Formalism. The Russian Formalists did not explore philosophical aspects of formalism or the relation of form and content, but they concentrated chiefly on practical matters of form in a work of art, particularly language. If Bell’s general ideas about form are based on fine art, the Russian Formalists’ conclusions are derived from their examination of the language of the text. But the Russian Formalists’ ambition is greater than Bell’s. If Bell was interested in knowing the difference between works of art and non-art, the Russian Formalists wanted to create a *formalnyi metod* (formalist methodology), an autonomous science of literature which deals with the unique qualities of literary material. This would allow them to re-examine traditional methods of studying the history of literature: it is not the history of writers and their works, trends of social life and their impact on writers and their works; it is the development of form and “investigation must go from constructional function to literary function; from literary function to verbal function” (Richter 756).

In addition to studying the poetics of poetry and fiction, the role of “rhythm” and “phonic texture” in poetry, the distinction between *syuzhet* (plot) and *fabula* (narrative) in fiction, the Russian Formalists, like Bell, were concerned with the question of what makes a work become a work of art, or more accurately, what transforms words into poetry, and what can unify all types of art. Like Bell, the Russian Formalists found these not in the content but in the form of works of art, above all in their material and language. For Bell it is significant form, for Jakobson it is “literariness”; for Shklovsky it is *ostranenie* (defamiliarization). “Poetry,” Jakobson writes, “is language in its aesthetic function. For this reason, the scientific object of literature is not literature, but its literariness, which makes a work literary” (*Raboty* 275). “When analyzing a literary work,” he explains, “a linguist is concerned with its literariness, or the process of transforming words into poetry and its system of techniques through which this process is made possible” (81). In this process Jakobson is particularly interested in the notion of *poetic function*. Poetic function exists in all human linguistic activities, but it plays a key role in the language of poetry. According to him, it is important to study carefully the role of poetic function and literariness as a formalist characteristic of poetry because “poetic form clearly is a universal phenomenon of human culture” (80).

Just as for Jakobson literariness plays an important role in the poetic text, for Shklovsky it is the use of ordinary language to make familiar things appear new and attractive. Shklovsky explains this technique of “defamiliarization” as follows: Because the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not that important* (Richter 749; author’s emphasis).

Though the Formalists are not concerned with the content of a literary work and the social and moral meaning of literature per se, their concentration on what attracts the reader to a literary work, on the meaning of art form, especially their in-depth study of techniques and language in poetry, was acknowledged by Bakhtin himself. “In the work of the Formalists,” Bakhtin writes, “besides completely unfounded affirmations because they are too general, we come across many observations that have a scientific value. . . . The study of the technique of literary works in general has begun for the first time in the land of material aesthetics in Western Europe and Russia” (*Voprosy* 13). Nevertheless, as pointed out by Bakhtin, the Formalists experienced very serious problems. Their “completely unfounded affirmations” were caused by their desire to transform what Bakhtin calls “formalist method” into general methodology, poetics into a sort of *spetsialnaia estetika* (specialized aesthetics) and *materialnaia estetika* (material aesthetics) into philosophical aesthetics. According to Bakhtin, the Formalists’ material aesthetics is not related at all to Kant’s or Herbart’s aesthetics of form, nor is it similar to Hegel’s or Schelling’s aesthetics of content.

Designed to be an art theory but lacking a philosophical basis, the Formalists’ material aesthetics only deals with a technical aspect of art creation. It does not explain the fundamental distinction between an aesthetic object and a work of art, between *arkhitektonitseskaia forma* (architectonical form) and *kompozitxiionnaia forma* (compositional form). It also fails to explain why *estetitseskoe videnie* (aesthetic view) exists outside art. Bakhtin’s most serious accusation against the Formalists is their contention that “the composition of a work of art is considered the main value of art and the aesthetic object itself” (18).

Bakhtin provides a detailed explanation of the concepts the Formalists have trouble dealing with. First, he calls an *aesthetic object* “the content of aesthetic activity (observation) directed at an art work.” Its content reflects an artistic view, a perception of life whereas a work of art does not. The content of an aesthetic object has a form of its own which Bakhtin calls *architectonical form*. Determined by its architectonical form, an aesthetic object is therefore not something abstract or undecipherable, but becomes an artistic work when its content is rendered concrete. Bakhtin defines *compositional form* as material organized into a work of art. Compositional forms, therefore, possess a teleological goal, “serve” a certain purpose, and are often evaluated under a *technical angle* (emphasis added). By contrast, architectonical forms do not “serve” anything. They are the forms that exist in their aesthetic uniqueness, “the forms of spiritual and physical values invented by aesthetic man, the form of nature as man’s living environment, the forms of events in their personal, social, and historical aspects” (20). Architectonical forms stipulate the selection of compositional forms. For example, *tragedy*, which is an architectonical form, selects for itself *drama*, a compositional form. Similarly, *lyric* as an architectonical has *lyrical poems* as compositional forms. According to this classification, *satire*, *heroic idealization*, *type*, *character* are pure architectonical forms. *Chapters*, *stanzas*, *lines* are units that are pure compositional forms. *Rhythm*, in particular, may belong to this or that category. If we understand rhythm as something inside belonging to a lyrical type, then it is architectonical form. If we see it as the arrangement of sound material that can be felt and perceived directly by our ears, then it belongs to compositional form.

In his landmark essay “Problema sodergjania, materiala i formy v slovesnom khudogiestvennom tvortschestve” (“The Question of Content, Material, and Form in the Creation of Art Language”) Bakhtin presents pretty adequately his ideas about form in general, as well as factors that contribute to the formation of form in a work of art, particularly the art of language.

Bakhtin’s starting position is that *form should be explained in connection with content, inseparably from content* (emphasis added). We find Bakhtin’s discussion of the relation between form and content very close to Hegel’s. For example, he writes: “The basic function of aesthetics is studying the aesthetic object in its unique fashion. Above all, it is important to understand the aesthetic object in a comprehensive manner, understand form and content in their fundamental relation, that is, *form as form of*

*content and content as content of form*, understand the uniqueness and rules of the reciprocal relationships between them” (70; emphasis added). Bakhtin frequently reminds us that “Content is content of this particular form and form is form of this particular content” (42); and “Content and form interpenetrate each other, are inseparable from each other” (34). According to Bakhtin, “form is not contentedness,” as some people say, but it is content, a content expressed in a particular form.<sup>1</sup>

Starting with this conception, Bakhtin develops at length the use of form in artistic creation. According to him, “Form on the one hand is material, entirely existing on the basis of material and being inescapably bound to it. On the other hand, its value lies in its ability to take us out of the limits of a work of art because its material is organized and it becomes an object” (24). This reminds us of Hegel’s statement quoted above: “The content is not formless, but has the form in its own self, quite as much as the form is external to it. There is thus a doubling of form. At one time it is reflected into itself; and then is identical with the content. At another time it does not at all affect the content.” Bakhtin calls this “external” thing, which “does not at all affect the content,” the not-yet organized material, the not-yet becoming “artistic significant form” or “aesthetic significant form.”

It is worth noting that the terminology Bakhtin used is almost identical with what Bell had used to describe his conception of “significant form.” It is not clear if Bakhtin had ever been influenced by Bell (Bakhtin’s essays were written ten years after Bell had published *Art*), but in their explanation we see these two authors’ common points. For example, when explaining significant form Bakhtin writes: “Artistic significant form is always related to something, it has something through which it is related to and inseparably bound to material” (15). In another place, he writes: “In form *I find myself*, find the positive artistic creativity of form; furthermore, that exists not only in its stage of creativity, not only in its creativity but also when the observation of the art work takes place. To a certain degree I have to experience myself as creator of form so that I can possess the artistic significant form with an aesthetic meaning as is meant by its real essence” (57; my emphasis).

Put another way, “significant form of art” is one that is capable of acting upon the people, provoking in them the impression of being the artist, stirring in them human feelings. Bakhtin explains, “I need to live with the form just like my positive attitude toward content so that I can live with the latter in accordance with aesthetics: in form and through form I sing, tell stories, describe things; through form I demonstrate my own love, my affirmation, my desire” (58). To do so, that is, to become “aesthetic significant form,” form must “contain to the full a source of emotional and thinking energy” (14).

This brings us back to Bell’s explanation of the function of “significant form”: “[S]ignificant form conveys to us an emotion felt by its creator and that beauty conveys nothing” because it “stands charged with the power to provide aesthetic emotion in anyone capable of feeling it” (*Art* 338, 337). It is clear that there are common things

between Bell and Bakhtin. Both use the term “significant form,” both affirm the emotional energy condensed in aesthetic form, and both emphasize the artist’s role in feeling and transferring aesthetic emotion to his pen. And yet there are vast differences between the two men.

Unlike Bell, Bakhtin employs his conception of “artistic significant form” or “aesthetic significant form” to remind us that the form he is speaking of here has an aesthetic meaning, not a philosophical, social, or moral one. This aesthetic meaning—and this is an important difference between him and Bell—cannot exist outside of its relation with content. Bakhtin writes: “Lying outside of content, that is, outside its relation with the world with its human factors, the world as the object of moral perception and activities, form will not be able to possess an aesthetic meaning, will not be able to realize its fundamental functions” (*Voprosyi* 32). This is completely different from Bell’s perception of form. “The contemplation of pure form,” according to Bell, “leads to a state of extraordinary exaltation and complete detachment from the concerns of life” (*Art* 341). In particular, whereas for Bell “significant form” is his essential conception, his distinction between art and non-art, for Bakhtin artistic form, or artistic significant form, must not be seen as everything and confused with material. With this distinction Bakhtin has developed a very important theory of form in the creation of art. He cares more about the role of form in a work of art than about the linkage of form and content, about their interpretation and mutual independence.

Close to Hegel’s conception of “the doubling of form”—form is what exists in content and also outside it, is content and external and indifferent to content—is Bakhtin’s argument that “form needs to be understood and studied in two ways: (1) from inside a purely<sup>2</sup> aesthetic object as a creative form, that is, form with a value, directed toward form and bound to content; and (2) from inside the entire art work constructed with material” (*Voprosyi* 56).

For Bakhtin material is not form. Form becomes form only when it is related to content and is the form of content. Material must be reorganized in a composition in order to become form. These compositional forms, determined by architectural forms, are existing forms of contents of artistic or aesthetic views. Thanks to this architectural form, the content of an artistic view becomes the aesthetic object, an entirely independent entity, which has nothing to do with material. Only when realized by material can an aesthetic object become a work of art.

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From our analysis of the various ideas about form we have seen that form in artistic creation is a very complex concept. These questions need to be explored more: What is artistic form? What element is form and what are its characteristics? First of all, it is important to distinguish the form of a literary work from its artistic form. Artistic form is the inside linked to content whereas the form of a literary work may comprise both artistic form and physical forms, such as covers, paper, print for literature and canvas, paper for painting. What is important here is external physical forms are related

to the mode of existence of a work of art.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, artistic form itself as “the inside” compared with the “materialness” of the outside in its turn has two sides: inner form and outer form. For Bakhtin architectural form is inner form and compositional form is outer form. According to René Wellek and Austin Warren, though the concept of “inner form” had originated from Plotinus and Shastresbury and later was often widely used in German aesthetics, its propagation only complicated the problem. As Wellek and Warren explain, “The boundary line between outer and inner form remains completely obscure” (140).

To solve the difference between form and content or the difference between the abstract and the concrete which had caused an inaccurate explanation of the true nature of a literary work, the Structuralists proposed to substitute the structuralist concept for the concept of form. According to them, this “sums up the whole difference between formalism and structuralism” (Lévi-Strauss 140). In his landmark essay “Structuralism and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp” Claude Lévi-Strauss posits that “Form and content are of the same nature, susceptible to the same analysis. Content draws its reality from its structure and what is called form is the ‘structural formation’ of the local structure forming the content” (397, 421). Lévi-Strauss further explains: “For [structuralism] the two domains must be absolutely separate, since form alone is intelligible, and content is only a residual deprived of any significant value. For structuralism this opposition does not exist. There is not something abstract on one side and something concrete on the other” (421).

Roman Ingarden, a structuralist and strong critic of Formalism, offered a phenomenological approach to literature. “A literary work,” he writes, “can be understood as a product of the author’s creative activities, which are purely subjective and intentional” (*Issledovania* 156). Ingarden does not analyze a literary work on the basis of form and content but rather in accordance with a “two-dimensional, multi-layered concept” (156). In the first dimension, according to Ingarden, a literary work has at least four layers: (1) sounds of words and the combination of language at a high order, (2) combinations with definite meanings (meanings of words and sentences), (3) described objects (human beings, things, factors), and (4) schematic objects.<sup>4</sup> In Ingarden’s view, this concept allows us to “explain the nature of all the elements of a literary work and show its unique structure and specific mode of existence of a work of art, as well as the relation between the author, his work, the reader, and finally its attitude toward the real world” (176).

Ingarden, Bakhtin, and Lévi-Strauss, while basing their concept of artistic form on different methodologies, have one thing in common: their recognition of the role of form and its relation to content in the Hegelian tradition, and their rejection of Formalism advocated by Bell and the Russian Formalists. Known as Neo-Formalism, this school of thought has many valid points. Nevertheless, argues Noel Carroll, it does not offer a satisfactory explanation of the nature of artistic form, because “what we call the artistic form of a work depends upon our conception of the content of the work. But

the notion of content . . . is excessively ambiguous” (137). In many cases even “not all works of art possess content” (153).

Another difficulty is although it is widely accepted that content determines form and has an impact on form, we do not know much about their relationship and how content influences form. These questions are not easy to answer. Many problems should be addressed here. For example, when Hegel uses the word “Form” he implies two meanings: “Form of the Movement” and “Form of the Realization.” If form is the existing form of content (for Hegel it is “the absolute idea”) in its process of movement, then the meaning “content transforming into form” would be easy to understand, for form (for classicism, for example) is no other than the idea that finds its existing form in that stage of movement. But if form is the outside that materializes the inside, then how the inside transforms into the outside, and how it determines the outside Hegel does not clearly explain. Bakhtin is aware of this when he asks: “How can form, which is completely based on material, become form of the content and be inseparable from the content in terms of value, or to put it differently, how can compositional form, that is, the organization of material, realize architectural form, that is, the realization of the unity and organization of these perceptive and moral values?” (57). The question is more succinctly asked in another place: “How can form as the materialization by way of language of the subjective active attitude toward content become the creative form and the form that completes the content?” (59).

According to Bakhtin’s explanation, “the creative activity of the author-creator and of receiver embraces all the aspects of language. Thanks to them he can create a form capable of completing and directing at the content” (62). Bakhtin differentiates five factors of language as the material of literature<sup>5</sup> and describes the artist’s and the receiver’s creative self as it goes into the material and the language. According to him, the fifth factor, that is, the sensation of the active nature of language, the sensation of the active creation of the sound, is said to be the governing factor, the focus of creative energies.

Bakhtin’s explanation, which is deeply “Bakhtinian,” is more influenced by philosophy than literary study. Nevertheless, it is one of his rare efforts to understand how “content transforms into form,” how the form inside transforms into the form outside (Phuong Lưu 77). In fact, the relationship between form and content had been debated for a very long time. It was even mentioned in Eastern aesthetics very early. However, the process of transforming from content into form, from idea into utterance had not been clearly presented. For example, in ancient Chinese aesthetics we often come across the concept that “Tao is the origin of Literature” (Tao exists before literature), or “In the mind it is *chi*; expressed in words it is poetry.” Going from Tao to literature is an extremely complex procedure, just as to become poetry *chi* has to undergo many stages and assume many styles of development. *Chi* exists in many types, not just in poetry. But it is not easy to know when *chi* gets into poetry and becomes poetry. Liu Xie reiterates this in *Wensindaolong*: “Because feelings are

different, literature has to adopt different techniques to describe them; it is impossible not to use feelings to create the essence of literature” (qtd. in Phương Lưu 64). But Liu Xie’s explanation, like Hegel’s, is too general. Bakhtin’s concept about the shaping and nature of the novel as a literary genre in famous works like *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* has a very important significance in the application of methodology and poetics to study artistic form in general and a literary work in particular.

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A study of artistic form in the context of its relation to content, as has been seen, is a correct approach. It allows us to identify the main features of form and the nature, function, and especially meaning of form in artistic creation and eventually that of art in man’s life. Nevertheless, the absolutization of the relation between content and form and especially the absolute subjugation of form to content will gradually lead to misconceptions not only in theory but also in the practice of artistic creation.

When speaking of the meaning of artistic form the first thing we often hear is, form assists content. How can it be? Confucius said: “Unrefined language cannot go too far.” Liu Xie also writes: “Because books and teachings by the Ancients are called literature, how can they not be literary? Purified water becomes ripples. Trees yielding hard wood will eventually blossom. Brightness depends on essence. If tigers and leopards have brown furs but no stripes, they are no different from dogs and goats. Rhinos’ thick skins are red because this color gives them beauty” (qtd. in Phương Lưu 65- 66). Here the function of form is to intensify the beauty of content. Nowadays this concept is becoming more and more popular. As Vladimir Soloviev explains, “The perfect beauty of form increases the speed of the spirit embodied in it” (qpt. in Phạm Vĩnh Cư 72).

In addition to that purpose of beautification, form has a much more important function: it brings to content, which is an essence, a realist material existence. “Aesthetic object,” Bakhtin explains, “only exists through the creation of a work of art that employs concrete material (aesthetic vision existing outside art is impure, because of the lack of the adequate organization of material to a certain extent as when viewing Nature ); before this work is created and independently separated from this creation the aesthetic object did not exist; it actually exists for the first time with the work” (*Voprosyi* 55). Bakhtin also develops this idea elsewhere, especially in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*: “Without understanding this new form of visualization, one cannot correctly understand that which was seen and unveiled in life for the first time with the help of that form. Artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time” (34). Bakhtin’s ideas, as we have seen, are extremely important. Not only do they explain clearly the essence of the relation of content and form; they also elevate artistic form to a higher level where form no longer has a secondary role but is as important as content, born at the same time as content and inseparable from content. If there is no

form, if there is no way to use words, colours, lines, and sounds, content itself is still far from not being definite and complete. Material and the organization of material will not only bring to content an outer form but also make content become complete and perfect. “Ideas,” Lev Vuigodsky writes, “cannot be expressed in language but rather be accomplished in language” (323). Failing to understand this means failing to understand the nature of artistic creation and the function of and difficulty in the study of form in artistic creation.

The difficulty lies in the fact that the artist has to find a form in which the content appears complete, perfect, and final. But this is not an easy task because the content that the artist wants to describe is quite different from ordinary information. In non-literary texts like official and scientific documents, for example, because the content usually has a single and specially determined meaning and its transformation into the new form is simple enough, it is not too difficult to understand it. But artistic content is different. It is man’s spiritual world. It is his anxiety about truth and about good and evil, love of beauty, passionate yearning for happiness and freedom. It is also about hope and despair. Artistic content is not a composite of *a priori* ideas and general feelings, but it comprises incomplete thoughts, unknown vibrations, vague emotions, and impressions. As T.S. Eliot says, “[F]eeling and emotion are particular, whereas thought is general” (8). Such meanings and emotions, like life, always grow, change, multiply, are private, never get finalized. To give an appropriate form to this living being that is private, multi-faced, always changing is extremely difficult. It was not accidental that Confucius said in *The Analects*: “If essence is more than form, literature risks being coarse; if form is more than essence, literature risks being empty. Essence and form rightly combined is the gentleman’s Tao” (qpt. in Phương Lưu 28). Rightness as a requirement for literature is also what Hegel saw as a prerequisite for a work of art: “A work of art that wants the right form is for that reason no right or true work of art” (*Encyclopedia* 289).

But what is “the right form”? Art has chosen for its special content a right form known as images. Artistic images with their diverse, half real and half unreal meanings are the rightest form for the special nature of content in art. But what is the “right” form and how can it be done? Should structure be suitable with material as the Structuralists advocated? Should language be splendid enough to match the grandeur of ideas according to traditional Oriental aestheticians? Or should one search for the best way to express what one wants to write about? The feeling about the difficulty of finding a right form of expression is a haunting desire common to all artists and writers. Liu Xie is aware of this when he writes: “At the moment [the writer] starts to write, that euphoric sensation still multiplies a thousand times. When he finishes, he finds he could not even say half of what he had wanted to say!” (qtd. in Dương Ngọc Dũng 211). Bù Xuân Phái once confessed: “It is not easy to paint as you really want!” (72).

To paint and to write right what the artist has in mind and as he wishes is his creative need. It is also a requirement for all creation of artistic form. However, if we

think that creative artistic activities are not simply a process of moving from the artist to his work but also going from his work to the audience, then aesthetic value of work does not only lie in the fact that the artist has found a “right” form to express his idea, but rather in the fact that the audience feel that the artist has so rightly and adequately represented what they thought and felt but did not know how to express. The appeal of the work in part derives from similarities between the writer’s and the reader’s living experience. This coincidence is possible because this living experience is contained in the content and expressed through the form. “Artistic value,” Dostoevsky explains, “is the writer’s ability to present his ideas through the characters and images so clearly that the reader can understand the writer’s ideas as well as the latter understands his own ones” (68-69). Tolstoy also has this to say about artistic creation:

A work of art is considered a real artistic work when the receiver cannot imagine anything better than what he has seen, heard, understood, when he feels he remembers something that he might have encountered many times, that he seems to have known for a long time, only that he does not know to express it and now somebody says it for him. And if the receiver feels that the artist says for him something different, then it is no longer art. (343)

It is obvious that artistic creation is inseparable from the artist’s creation of form. But for “inner forms” or forms that Bakhtin calls “architectonical forms” the artist’s subjective efforts are completely limited, because, as Bakhtin explains, this is not what he can create and arrange as he does for “compositional forms,” but they are “the forms of aesthetic man’s spiritual and physical values, the forms of nature as man’s living environment, the forms of events in their personal, social, and historical aspects.” To put it another way, inner form is directly determined by the artist’s spiritual world, ideas, and emotions. Artists do not “create” it; they only express it, or more exactly, they strive to make it manifest itself in their work thanks to “outer forms” such as material and techniques. This perception of the relationship between inner form and content is very close to the general understanding of the relation between literature and Tao in ancient Chinese and Vietnamese aesthetics. Artists do not create literature. Literature emerges from the Mind, from Tao, is the outer appearance of Tao and the Mind, inextricably tied to them. Tao is literature’s spirit and soul. If Tao changes, literature will change. If the Mind is clear, literature will shine. This type of form is created not because of the artist’s talent but because it is the work of Tao and the Mind. That is why in the East people say talent is derived from emotions.

Nevertheless, in art in addition to inner form there is outer form. Outer form, however, is related to content through inner form, not directly related to it. In spite of this, its *sludjebnost* (serviceableness) to content, to use Bakhtin’s phrase, is quite obvious. This means that in artistic creation the artist has to create *right* outer forms capable of not only expressing what he wants but also knowing that the audience appreciate his speaking on their behalf exactly what they want. But is the function and

meaning of the creation of outer forms just that? Is that all we need to know about the difficulty of creating forms? We will have to examine further this problem.

According to Hegel, in art “sensuous shapes and sounds present themselves, *not simply for their own sake and for that of their immediate structure*, but with the purpose of affording in that shape satisfaction to higher spiritual interests, seeing that they are powerful to call forth a response and echo in the mind from the depths of consciousness” (*Aesthetics* 44; emphasis added). For Hegel in an artistic work besides satisfying a different purpose, forms appear for their own sake. Outer form can be considered perfect even when the content it expresses does not meet what authentic art requires. As Baudelaire explains, “Words by themselves and independent with the meaning they are meant to express (that is to say, independent with the meaning of their vocabulary) have their own beauty and value” (qtd. in Jakobson 83). Nevertheless, creating a satisfying form in art is not easy. Not only does the artist have to bring to the content a suitable form, he has to do the best he can to make that form exist “for its own sake”; in other words, he ought to perfect it so it can bring the audience a delightful aesthetic feeling. What is difficult is, he may succeed in presenting the idea but fails to find beautiful diction to express it. If he tries to search for beautiful diction, he might have to give up the idea. That is “a double difficulty” that not everybody can overcome. It is not by accident that poet TẾ Hanh says:

After reading a good poem  
My first idea is I can do it  
My last idea is I feel powerless.

That sense of powerlessness is what any writer can clearly feel. In order to understand adequately the meaning of artistic form and the artist’s talent, it is important to distinguish these two aspects of the function of form. The process of artistic creation is always a combination of two different currents of feelings: “life feelings” and “aesthetic feelings.” Xuân DiÇu has made an excellent observation of the artist’s psychological process in these words: “When I speak of emotions, I speak not only of emotional vibrations, for one can be moved so much and so sincerely that tears come out. But tears are not necessarily poetry. When I speak of emotions, I mean to speak of emotional vibrations which come simultaneously with a *spout of rhythm, imagery, sounds*. *What a delightful creation!*” (55; emphasis added).

“A spout of rhythm, imagery, sounds” is the content of “significant form” that Bell has spoken of. Words, colours, sounds that do not contain these vibrations are not authentic artistic forms. Thanks to these “delightful” vibrations felt by the artist, his work can bring to the audience a special kind of vibration known as aesthetic vibration.

For the ordinary layman aesthetic vibration is not easy to experience any time. Rather, it depends on his situation of appreciation, on the “spout of rhythm, imagery, sounds” that the artist brings to his work, and on the audience’s personality and appreciation ability. Generally, one experiences only “emotional vibrations.” Even for

the creator it is not always easy to be plunge into “a spout of rhythm, imagery, sounds” strong enough to absorb the audience totally. The artist differs from the layman not in his emotions and ideas but in his ability to master his words, his pen, his keyboard. His aim is to bring to the audience his perception of beauty and perfection—that is, to “defamiliarize” the all-too familiar and find newer and independent ways of self-expression. Because we tend to abuse the concept of talent, we do not see the boundary between the real and the unreal, unwittingly lower the value of talent, and consequently debase art.

Beside its social meaning art has another function greater than we thought: its role in the development of man. Art, as Hegel puts it, is a “form” of idea, consciousness, and spirituality that is existing and developing. Man’s perception is something that grows and progresses in art. So does his spiritual life because in art he is freer, more sensible and humane. Thanks to art, his emotional life is also enriched, refined, meaningful. Art is the fertile soil that nourishes the qualities and spiritual values man has accumulated during his striving to shed his primitiveness to become what Marx called a “species-being,” that is, one with a consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Artistic creation enables the artist to control material and successfully use his skills and techniques. In this process he also gets “a delight of creation” capable of bringing immeasurable happiness. Thanks to the artist’s search for and discovery of form, his experience with “vibrations of rhythm, imagery, sounds,” the public also is familiarized with what is called “aesthetic feelings.” Aesthetic feelings enrich man’s life, boost his spirit, make him feel more valuable as a person, change the world into a better place. By exposing himself to art for an extended period of time man can learn to perceive more beautiful things in the world with his own eyes. Being able to hear and distinguish very fine shades of music, for example, is another great advantage of long practicing art. Art opens another door, another way for man to reach an extremely vast world full of voices, sounds, lights, and colours in life and in nature. Art brings to the audience, therefore, a source of pleasure and happiness similar to the artist’s “joy of creation.” Creating artistic forms thus conceived contributes to the perfection of man, to the full development of the spiritual world and the senses connected to its spirit and body. Artistic creation of forms has not only an artistic but humanistic significance.

Practically, artistic creation especially in poetry and fine art in the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century shows that form basically has undergone many changes—its expression becomes daunting, multi-faced, much harder to comprehend. We always want to encourage novel innovations, but it is not easy to accept them right of hand, especially for ourselves. If our taste is tainted by prejudice and ideology, it will be worse. For this reason, a proper attitude to artistic form in our manner of exploration, creation, perception, and appreciation of the literary work is a great challenge to the creator and the public. There is no limit to novelty, only limit to mediocrity. Not every colour, word, sound carries a meaning, or is significant, symbolic, or metaphoric. The meaning of a form may be found in the form itself. Here it is

impossible to substitute the words for the feeling or the utterances, or the lines and the colours for the idea. Here is the place of talent. It is difficult to find talent in creation; it is perhaps even more difficult to find talent in the appreciation of colours, words, and sounds.

That has been enough to show how difficult the creation of form in art is. But the difficulty already presupposes the significance and function of art. Therefore, to advocate strongly for novelty in creation of form is to advocate for creation in art. To a certain extent, it means to advocate for man’s total development and freedom.

## NOTES

This translation is based on Lê Ngọc Trà’s original essay entitled “Hình thức và ý nghĩa của Hình thức trong Sáng tạo Nghệ thuật” (*Tuyển tập* 82-130). I would like to thank the author for preparing a special version of his work for Western readers and for assisting me in completing the translation. Book titles and quoted texts in Russian are provided by the author. All the translations from the Vietnamese are mine.

1. Bakhtin’s expression *Xoderjatennaia khudojextvennaia forma*” has been inaccurately translated as “artistic form bearing content.” This has led to the concept that artistic form is not pure technique but close to content. This translation is not only inaccurate, but also does not correctly represent Bakhtin’s idea. For Bakhtin form is not related or close to content, but *is* content. The entire text of Bakhtin’s thought is as follows: “Language with its definite linguistics does not go inside the aesthetic object but stays behind the latter. The aesthetic object itself is constructed from the content which is aesthetically formalized or from the artistic form of the content” (*Voprosyi literaturyi i estetiki* 49).
2. By “pure” Bakhtin means the aesthetic object is not bound yet to the material.
3. For an examination of mode of existence of a literary work, see René Wellek and Austin Warren 142-59 and Ingarden 21-91.
4. See Ingarden. 28-29. Ingarden calls “schematic figures”(“Vidy”) images, paintings in their general forms like things seen from a distance, with lines and shapes not yet clearly defined. Such figures are not simply seen through the eyes, but rather they are determined by the characteristics of the object being observed and the observer’s psychophysiology when he conducts the observation.
5. Five elements of language include (1) the sonic or musical quality of language; (2) the meanings of words and their nuances and variations; (3) the relationship of words; (4) the multidimensionality of speakers’ relationships as shown in the psychological, emotional, intellectual spheres of the language being used; and (5) impressions of the active nature of language, particularly its creation of meaningful sounds. See Bakhtin, *Voprosyi* 62.
6. According to Marx, whereas the animal is not conscious of its species, man recognizes not only his individuality but also what exists beside him, that is, his species. It is man’s “conscious life activity” that distinguishes him from “animal life activity,” making him what Marx calls a “species-being.” For Marx’s discussion of *Gattungswesen* (species-being), see his “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)” in *Early Writings*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.



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