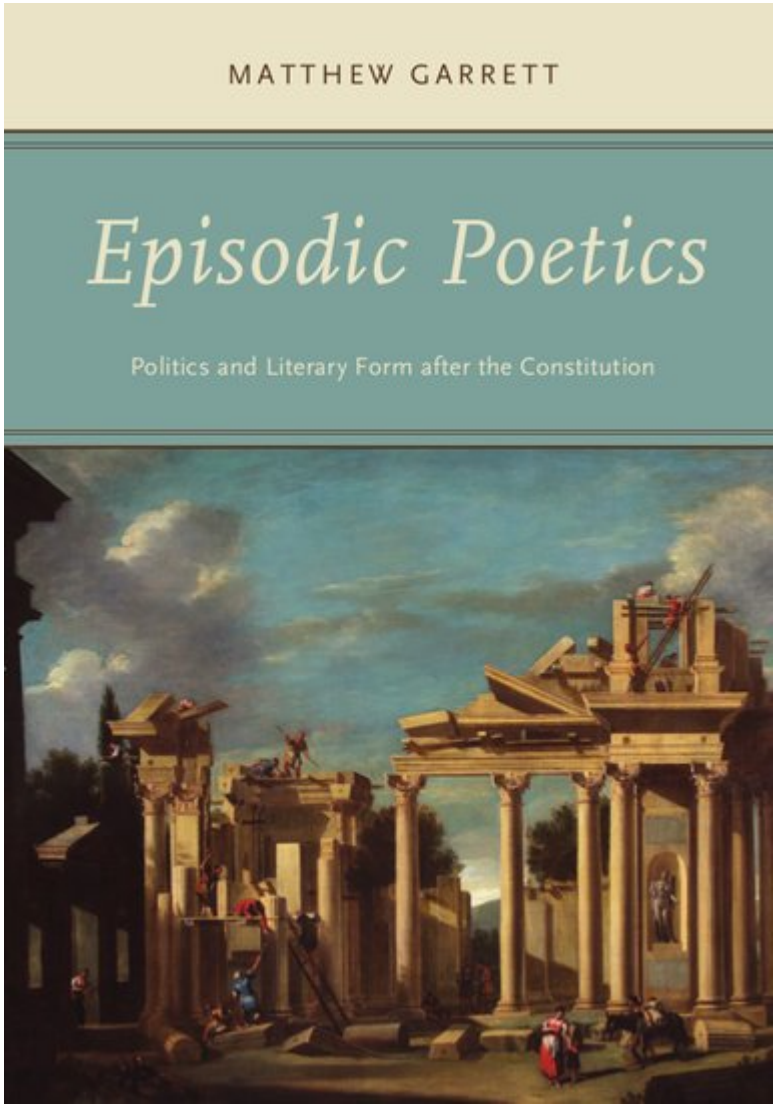
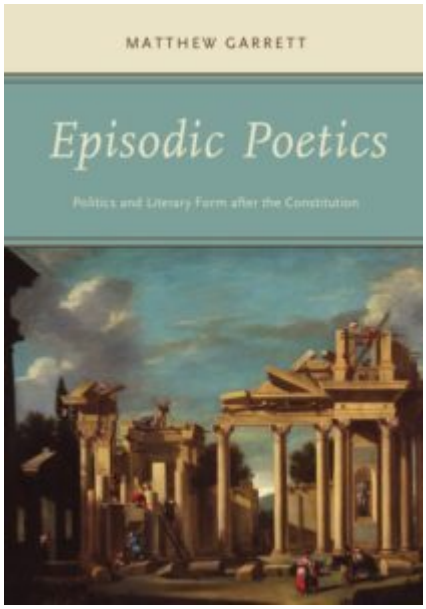
The Constitution, the Great Recession, and the Politics of Literary Form



Matthew Garrett, *Episodic Poetics: Politics and Literary Form after the Constitution.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 256 pp., $65.

Matthew Garrett's extraordinary *Episodic Poetics: Politics and Literary Form After the Constitution* explores the complex textures that resulted when the post-constitutional moment's consolidating energies found verbal expression in the fragmentary form of the period's literary production. The book is a "microstructural or subgeneric literary history" (88). It follows the episode—an "*integral*, but also *extractable* unit of any narrative" across a range of genres: political essay, memoir, novel, and miscellany (3). As Garrett argues in his lucid introduction, the episode is a dialectical form, "a part that exists as such only in relation to a real or implied whole" (4). This mediating between the one and the many makes the episode an especially rich site for analyzing the politics of form in the early nation. This episodic

writing is, Garrett argues, commodified, albeit imperfectly—reproducible but not mimetic, indexical but not iconic. “It is the episode,” Garrett writes, “in its flexibility and diaphanous quality—part gesturing toward whole, whole gesturing back—that does the literary work of this emergent bourgeois culture” (21). The representative texts of Garrett’s four genres, via their respective logics of contagion, error, hesitation, and volubility helped delineate the contours of the political. *Episodic Poetics*‘ investigation of these dynamics is as theoretically sophisticated as it is elegantly constructed, and in what follows I can only gesture at the readerly pleasures that attend following the involutions of its nuanced argument.



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In chapter 1, “The Poetics of Constitutional Consolidation,” *The Federalist’s* episodic fragmentation—eighty-five essays split between three authors united under a single pseudonym, Publius—emerges as key to understanding how, in Hamilton and Madison’s hands, the American *unum* was to emerge from the chaotic *pluribus.*Garrett reads the dialectic between Hamiltonian binarism and Madisonian fragmentation as an essential element of the text’s politics. *The Federalist* nationalizes, in part, by using metaphors of contagion and disease to pathologize antifederal opposition. Garrett argues that the repressed vehicle of such figures is debt, and that everything about *The Federalist*, from its narrative grammar to its physical presentation, works to make elite politics synonymous with national politics (28).

Chapter 2, “The Life in Episodes,” explores how Benjamin Franklin’s manipulation of the *Autobiography*‘s episodes registers and manages the same threatening “social multiplicity” (61). When Franklin corrects his famous

errata, he averts conflict by symbolically or literally repaying his debts. Vernon, a friend of the Franklin family, who inadvertently loans Franklin money, is repaid with interest; Franklin's abandonment of Deborah Franklin is rectified by their marriage (64). Other scholars have seen the *Autobiography* projecting revolutionary politics inward. Garrett sees Franklin's deft manipulation of the relationship between parts and whole, major and minor events, and mistakes and corrections as a paradigm for how to defuse conflict without actually relieving its underlying causes.

These fascinating formal rereadings of such canonical texts speak to our own political moment. The threats—multiplicity, plurality, and their near-synonyms—to which Franklin and the authors of *The Federalist* respond are stand-ins for something akin to "class conflict," a phrase Garrett employs only once, in a note. "Income inequality" does not appear at all, but then the period was characterized by far more dire forms of oppression. Nevertheless, when Garrett employs the Barthesian concept of "bourgeois," "owning class," or "ruling-class ex-nomination"—that is, the naturalization of capitalist ideology—the reverberations with the Great Recession of 2008 are clear. Publius binds essays and Franklin collects parts; both further the implicit claim that the "propertied class" is "the only available force for gathering together the social whole" (115). They are too big to fail, and we have inherited the fruits of their success.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the career of the episode in the evolving literary marketplace of the 1780s and 1790s. "The Fiction of Hesitation" argues that the dilated, meandering plots of the anonymous *Story of Constantius and Pulchera* (1789), Susanna Rowson's *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795), and Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799) translate Publius and Franklin's strategies of dispersal into forms suitable to a nascent literary market economy. Finding the first two texts especially well adapted to both intensive and extensive reading, Garrett argues that their formal alternation between a static domesticity in which not much happens and the duels, shipwrecks, and reunions that comprise the episodic plots provided a range of gratifying possibilities for readers. (In so doing, fiction also unsettled religious tract literature's reliance upon many of the same formal techniques.)

Ormond professes to be "the history of Constantia Dudley," but this description does not do justice to what Garrett rightly calls the novel's "distended" plot (97). After Constantia's father, Stephen, is betrayed and bankrupted by his former partner, the forger Thomas Craig, the Dudley family moves to Philadelphia, where they encounter the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. True to her name, Constantia remains in the city caring for the victims and resisting both rape and marriage. Ormond, the book's villain, attempts first to reason and later to force the resolute heroine out of her virtue; in the end she kills him with a penknife. The pull between the aptly named Constantia as the force for narrative diffusion and Ormond as an apostle of fatal closure creates another dialectic of plot and episodic interruption. This play between digression and story recalls the analogous strategies employed by Publius and Franklin, only

operating in a different register. That dialectic is Brown's narrative solution to the problem of plotting, and it is the only vehicle for change in *Ormond*. It also represents "Brown's aesthetic solution to the problem of revolution," since the questions of how to order a story and how to order a polity are versions of each other (113).

Chapter 4, "Miscellany and the Structure of Style," "anatomizes *Salamagundi*'s episodic whims as a form of commodity writing" (116). The collaborative effort of James Kirke Paulding and William and Washington Irving, *Salamagundi* (1807-08) is in many ways the "anti-*Federalist*": its narrative authority is aggressively dispersed among a number of fictional contributors, its material form is ephemeral, and it claims no moral, rational, or political authority (124). What remains is style, which emerges, in Garrett's analysis, as "a brilliant compromise in that … it enables a hegemonic articulation of class power" (143). By couching its whimsical episodic form in a gentlemanly or aristocratic style, "the 'Federalist' form of subjective self-assertion returns as its dialectical opposite, the 'Republican' volubility of an episodic commodity literature" (144). Unlike its predecessors, *Salamagundi* is "fully saturated by the market," meaning it can embrace the episodic in ways that the previous chapter's novels were forced to hold in suspension (121).

A decade after Jonathan Loesberg's *A Return to Aesthetics*, literary studies' aesthetic turn has—happily—lost some of its controversy along with its novelty. Nevertheless, when Garrett claims that *Episodic Poetic*'s "modest methodological injunction … is this: literary history is better understood *as an integral part of history* if we understand literary texts at multiple levels of scale and abstraction," his modesty is misleading (145). Garrett's theoretical interlocutors range from Aristotle to Zizek, but they are, nevertheless, carefully chosen. Garrett follows Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and Lukacs' "Megjegyzések az irodalomtörténet elméletéhez" ("Remarks on the Theory of Literature") among many others in claiming that literary form registers the sociopolitical antagonisms of its time and place more acutely than literature's thematic content. Formal readings, then, become the site for a politically engaged literary criticism of the kind *Episodic Poetics* pursues: "the *social* problem is … a *formal* problem of writing" (25). Garrett's take on these social problems is characteristic of the new formalists' tendency to favor the Marxist/Hegelian of the Frankfurt School over the Russian Formalists—though Bakhtin is a touchstone, and Lotman and Shklovsky appear in chapter 3. Nevertheless, his repeated invocation of Aristotle suggests a commitment to reconciling the approaches Marjorie Levinson dubbed "activist" and "normative formalism" in her 2008 *PMLA* article. In chapter 3, as if to literalize this goal, Garrett invokes Aristotle via the eighteenth-century rhetoricians Lord Kames and Hugh Blair, adducing the classic instance of normative aesthetic judgment by filtering it through an account of its reception. Garrett maintains the activist's interest in a historicized politics of form without abandoning normative belief in aesthetic accomplishment. Thus, as he writes with regard to *The Federalist,* "I take this rush to abstraction …

to be both a cornerstone of *The Federalist*'s formal achievement *and* the most unmediated aspect of its connection to the mercantile situation from which it emerges" (45). Conversely, Charles Brockden Brown's "transparently 'bad' plotting is interesting in the *specific ways* it manifests its 'badness'" (110). Garrett's scare quotes distance him from the aesthetic judgment leveled against Brown's plots, but they do not totally disavow it. Indeed, Garrett wants to recuperate aesthetic judgment as "the means of engaging with the very history that the judgment 'bad' would appear to have denied" (115).

For both its theoretical commitment to form and its literary analysis, *Episodic Poetics* is an important addition to a growing body of aesthetically oriented literary criticism. The book exemplifies Richard Strier's "indexical formalism"—an investment in form as historical because deictic—but also what Ed Cahill calls "archival formalism"—the "wide-angle perspective" that reveals the pervasiveness of "deep form." Cahill sees archival formalism as a defense against the complaint that the objects of formalist analysis are not themselves representative, an observation Garrett echoes in his "Conclusion" and elsewhere. At its best, sensitivity to these text's material forms adds nuance to these arguments. The ephemerality of *Salamagundi*, for example, is crucial to Garrett's analysis. Elsewhere in *Episodic Poetics*, however, the history of these texts' production and dissemination functions only analogically. For instance, Garrett argues plausibly enough that the fine and common copies of *The Federalist* materialize the social vision of its principal authors. He continues, "Volume 1 of the typical thick paper copy [of John and Archibald M'Lean's 1788 first edition of *The Federalist*] contains thirty-six (or so) blank leaves, filler that was needed to balance the width of the spines, to enable symmetry in the ornamental tooling" (58). It is possible that extra paper was included to preserve the volumes' Georgian balance, but if so the effort was unsuccessful—the two volumes remain quite unequal in length. But this elevation of the aesthetic seems unlikely. The Huntington Library copy, still in its publisher's binding, has 25 blank leaves—the remainder of the book's final signature plus a sheet and a half of extra paper. While it may strike the modern viewer as "obscenely gorgeous," surely such a judgment should be no less suspect than calling *Ormond*'s plotting "bad" (58). The tooled binding, as William Loring Andrews observed a century ago, is extremely well executed, but its speckled calf remains a far cry from gleaming morocco.

This is a quibble, to be sure, yet even such a minor aesthetic reappraisal might in turn prompt us to search for other explanations for these blank leaves. They might have been added for utilitarian rather than artistic reasons. Hamilton hoped the Federalist elite in Virginia would use their copies as a "debater's handbook" at the Richmond convention (31). The blank pages do not make the fine copies "*unreadable*," but they might well have made them more useful in the very specific context of Virginia and New York's ratification battles (58). Deciding between these two readings would require a wider-ranging bibliographical analysis than I have been able to perform, but such work has the potential to reveal a great deal about the historical connections between Federalist politics and the physical production of material texts. As John

Bidwell pointed out in *American Paper Mills, 1690-1832*, Whatman, Patch, and other English papermakers supplied the “superfine royal writing paper” that distinguishes the fine copies of The Federalist, paper that drew its name from the royal emblems used as watermarks (xxvi.) The common copies, on the other hand, apparently used paper from a new domestic source: Delaware’s Brandywine Mill. Because Garrett takes form to be more discursive than material, it is not clear how these elements of *The Federalist*‘s production speak to the politics of its literary form. But it is a testimony to the book’s ambition and success that *Episodic Poetics* provides a fascinating framework capable of investing such antiquarian details with new significance.

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