

## GENRE

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Literature has always been organized in genres, that is, in groups of works — tragedies, comedies, epigrams and the like—that belong together because they stand in the same tradition. Each genre is characterized by certain features, certain constellations of formal qualities; so that its members share many resemblances. How, exactly, do individual works relate to other similar works? Various answers to this question have been given, and have seemed for a time to hold the secret of literary originality. In consequence, genre has come to be one of the most compelling concepts in the whole of literary theory. It occupies a central position, beset with elusive issues. How do generic conventions change? Is this the same as asking how literature itself changes? Is classification by genre possible? Or is genre an accumulation of constantly changing codes? Are there rules of genre that condition aesthetic judgements? Such questions may appear abstract and general; yet they are involved in every act of criticism. This essay will glance at how they have been answered during the last century.

From the point of view of genre, the nineteenth century was an intensely creative period. It gave itself over to innovation and generic mixture with an almost medieval boldness. This was not achieved, however, against a background of adequate genre theory, for after the decay of neo-classical rhetoric a chasm had opened between practice and theory.

Three seeds of generic thinking, at most, proved fertile in the Victorian period. One was the idea of evolution of literary forms, on the biological model. Schiller had proposed that genres develop from 'primitive' or 'naïve' to 'artificial' or 'sentimental' versions. This valuable idea was taken up by many others, and eventually developed by C.S.Lewis (1942) into a distinction between a fresh 'primary' stage (exemplified by Homer's epics) and a 'secondary', self-consciously imitative stage (represented by Virgil's *Aeneid*), more concerned with considerations of generic purity.

Another idealized mixture: original writers had to make sure that pure forms of genre were blurred, mixed, or if possible evaded altogether. The third seed took root, contradictorily, in the hypothesis of a 'natural' division of all literature into dramatic, lyric and narrative. Its fertility, however, even in good critics like the mid-nineteenth-century Eneas Sweetland Dallas, produced a blighted, metaphysical luxuriance; burgeoning in meditations on hypostatized entities such as 'the lyric'. In a famous Festschrift article of 1967, René Wellek (1970) showed how unedifyingly vague such meditations mostly were (and, one might add, still are). Nevertheless, Wellek's salutary destructive work may have been taken a little too far. There is substance in Susanne K.Langer's neo-Kantian account of 'the great literary forms' in *Feeling and Form* (1953): her discussion of the use of tenses in lyric, for example, still retains interest. It is possible that the triple division, which after all goes back to Plato, may at least correspond to logical alternatives in the conscious construction of literary elements.

Romantic repudiation of the categories of genre was carried to a logical conclusion by Benedetto Croce, an anti-rhetorical theorist of very considerable influence. To Croce generic categories were simply 'false distinctions', showing 'of what dialectic pirouettes and sublime trivialities even philosophers are capable, when they begin to treat of the Aesthetic, of the tragic, comic, and humorous' (1909, p. 361). He conceded the existence of a 'bond of likeness' such as is observed among individuals, but denied, precociously, that such 'family likeness' had anything to do with definable classes (p. 119). Thus, each literary work approached is the subject of a unique aesthetic encounter, to which general ideas have no relevance. It is easy but facile to dismiss Croce's theory as relativistic, or as a mere *riscaldamento* of the doctrines of German Romanticism. He was a hero of modernism, and made a courageous attempt to penetrate beyond customary abstractions to the actual mental phenomena of criticism, and may be regarded as anticipating not only Wittgensteinian themes but also those of phenomenology—to say nothing of American New Criticism. More specifically, a Crocean approach was to underlie certain aspects of E.D.Hirsch's theory of intrinsic genre, discussed below. It recognizes, indeed, an enduring truth: namely, that genuine aesthetic responses are to individual works, not merely to representatives of classes.

However important Croce's ideas may now seem, in the early decades of this century they were almost totally ignored by literary scholars, who calmly went about their business of chronicling the 'fixed historical kinds'. Studies such as W.W.Greg's important *Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama* (1906), James Hutton's learned *The Influence of the Greek Anthology* (1922), and Dwight L.Durling's *Georgic Tradition in English Poetry* (1935) consisted for the most part of empirical lists of works, debts and 'influences'; if any theoretical impulse informed them, it was a quasi-Darwinian desire to trace

formal evolution. Such work has continued through more recent decades, although now with a more sophisticated method: among several excellent examples one might mention John Chalker's *The English Georgic* (1969) and Helen Cooper's *Pastoral: Medieval into Renaissance* (1977). Because of its diachronic approach, this sort of genre study has recently been out of critical fashion. But undeservedly—when most theoretically interesting criticism has long gone, it will remain of enduring value for its well-ordered information. Indeed, Greg's book, and others like it, laid the foundation for modern comparative literature studies. And the early chronicle histories of pastoral and georgic provided grist for the finer historiographic mills of a theorist like Ralph Cohen in *The Art of Discrimination* (1964), as well as for political applications like Anthony Low's *The Georgic Revolution* (1987).

The claims of traditional genre were asserted more theoretically by the Chicago Aristotelians—the philosopher Richard McKeon, the critics Elder Olson and R.W.Keast, the literary historian Bernard Weinberg, and above all the historian of ideas R.S.Crane. Committed to the teaching of critical method as an academic subject, the Chicago school was in theory pluralistically tolerant; but in practice its classicism was narrowly prescriptive—as in the way it dismissed German romantic ideas out of hand. The Chicagoans' approach was rhetorical, in the sense that they insisted criticism should be appropriate to the original historical genres—should treat, in a proportionate way, such rhetorical features of a work as plot, imitated action, character and diction (Aristotle's 'parts' of tragedy). Thus plot, a cardinal feature, is the focus in Crane's 'Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*' (1952). The Chicagoans' return to rhetorical detail may be considered a sort of progress. But their insistence on rigid genre boundaries, between classes with defining characteristics, vitiated all they achieved. They had put on blinkers excluding literature's true complexity and untidiness. In any case, the criticism performed under their aegis was not, in the event, very impressive. Perhaps their reaffirmation of neglected rhetorical ideas, perhaps only Crane's authority of intellect and personality, makes the Chicago school seem at all important.

The Chicago school explicitly assumed, just as the non-theoretical chroniclers assumed implicitly, that the historical kinds had each a peculiar 'external' form, a distinctive structure (like the octave and sestet of Petrarchan sonnets), definite and identifiable in much the same way as the features of biological species. The kinds evolved, to be sure; yet, contradictorily, they ran true to type and were invariable. Not surprisingly, the more minute literary history became, the shorter the lives of these invariable fixed kinds. They had, indeed, precise common characteristics; but these were so many and so arbitrary as to defy rationalization.

Understandably, critics who wanted a more explanatory concept of grouping turned to a broader approach, and examined what it was that similar genres had in common, and especially genres in different historical periods. These have tended to paint with a rather loose brush. They may be described as modal critics; although, particularly after Northrop Frye, the terms 'mode', 'genre' and 'kind' have all been used with a bewildering variety of applications. Modal studies have a great exemplar in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), a book that has inspired countless others; they include works like T.R.Henn, *The Harvest of Tragedy* (1966), Abbie Findlay Potts, *The Elegiac Mode* (1967), Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute* (1975) and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1968) on the carnival or comic mode.

Modal critics tend to ignore historical development. Indeed, many of them adopt a synchronic method, treating literature as if it were all written in the present—the domain of assumptions they privilege. Necessarily they must ignore many distinctions, and make do with a small number of shared features. This simpler, more malleable material enables them to achieve explanatory facility, if not exactly explanatory force. And the modal critics can claim a certain adventitious half-validity, in that many nineteenth-century and modern writers, at least, themselves adopted a modal view.

As one might almost expect, if it were not so paradoxical, the best of the synchronic modal critics are those, like Frye and Angus Fletcher, who know a great deal of literary history. The reader of Fletcher's *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964) finds a keen excitement in his brilliant development of such ideas as the generation of subcharacters. This, one feels, is how literature really works. And one might say the same of William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), so far as its investigation of thematic interaction of plot and subplot is concerned. Even Empson's treatment of *Alice in Wonderland* as pastoral, although hardly defensible historically, overextends the mode in an interesting way. Such criticism serves to put literary works beside unaccustomed neighbours in an illuminating way. Often this is done to make a contentious point; for modal critics are given to moral synthesis, and tend to be impatient moralists.

Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is a marvellous, maddening book, which draws, in a way unusual among 'powerful' theoretical works, on a wide range of deeply considered reading. Frye addresses himself to the understanding not of literary works, but of generic ingredients of literature at large. He sets out several highly original ideas about how genres might be compared: as, for example, by their 'mimetic mode' or height—their heroes' powers on a scale of human possibility. (For example, epic heroes are above average, but do not have the same supernatural involvements as those of romance.) Unfortunately, Frye's bold insights are a little clouded by his free use of terms like 'mode' in new and not adequately defined senses. Nor does he develop them to the point at which they might persuade

or challenge verification. Moreover, he often distinguishes modes (in the sense, this time, of genres) by poetical rather than critical procedures—distributing them among scalar compartments of mental space, perhaps, or among the seasons of a notional year. Such schematizing, however pedagogically suggestive it may be, is too arbitrarily imposed: it points to an unsatisfactory resolution of the historical problem. Frye's genre theory has been associated with structuralism, a connection he rightly disclaims; nevertheless, it would seem to be limited, in some ways, by a similarly synchronic disposition.

The next phase, that of the 1960s, needs to be seen in distant perspective, taking in the nature of meaning itself. Since Aristotle, this had been understood in terms of two complementary models: namely, the coding-decoding model, and the common-sense model of inferred intentions. Now, however, New Critics like William K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley and Cleanth Brooks introduced a method of interpretation whereby intention was disregarded, even flouted; they preferred to select interpretations that maximized richness. Not surprisingly, they had little interest in genre, with its constraining indications of the kind of work and meanings the writer intended. (Indeed, Wimsatt rejected the Chicago approach quite vigorously.) In any case, the New Critics limited their attention to a small number of closely related 'lyric' genres, all of short length. Other genres they ignored, or even despised (as did the contemporary Cambridge critics), but without developing theoretical reasons for doing so.

New Criticism focused its attention, albeit not very systematically, on unobvious or inadvertent meanings. This practice was taken to a theoretical extreme by the French structuralists, who did not regard writing as having any interesting, or indeed accessible, connection with writers. (Structuralism is a school of thought that attends to relations between things to the virtual exclusion of their substance and historical functions.) The structuralists thought of interpretation as exclusively an affair of decoding and analysing the results. Neither intention to mean nor biographical and immediate historical contexts of writing had the slightest value for them. Roland Barthes and other structuralists even spoke of the 'death' of the author. All that existed was 'Text'. Eventually, literature came to be seen, especially by the deconstructionists, as a series of intertextualities in which texts generated texts within a synchronic stasis.

The structuralists differed from the New Critics, however, in having no objection to genre abstractions, or to thinking in terms of classes—although of course they dismissed traditional genre theory out of hand. Indeed, genre was a congenial subject to them, being a coding system, on which they might be expected to excel. And, in the event, they succeeded in bringing out how far generic features were precisely codings, and not merely arbitrary marks of identification. Structuralist successes were mostly in theorizing about the novel (previously neglected, as a form that only

developed after traditional genre theory). Gérard Genette (1980), in particular, deserves mention. One or two structuralist studies of other modes are also of interest, such as Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (trans. 1973). Todorov's work is fresh and interesting, and less blinkered than usual by synchronism, since it studies a group of works mostly produced within a short historical period. For the most part, the structuralists ignored context, not to speak of historical change; Fredric Jameson's fine article 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', developed in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), was a notable exception—if, indeed, he counts at all as one of their number. Structuralism invariably treated genres as definable classes: hence one of the points of Jacques Derrida's attempt (1980) to subvert it deconstructively, by showing that indications of genre, by not themselves being within the genre, introduce inevitable 'contamination'. Such 'problems' only arise when genres are thought of as classes.

At the opposite extreme from structuralism, E.D.Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) reasserted authorial intention as the criterion of meaning. Hirsch reacted against the irresponsibilities of the New Critics; yet he shared certain of their emphases, notably that on the free-standing uniqueness of individual works. In this, he could even be regarded as a Crocean. Hirschian intentionalism is of no direct concern here; but there are far-reaching implications for genre theory in his analysis of the communication of meaning. For Hirsch, this is invariably communication of types. Broad genres in the traditional sense, however, he discounts as inevitably 'extrinsic'. They are of no more than transitory value, as a scaffolding of temporary use in constructing the intrinsic type; distant horizons which at best help to arrive at the far more narrowly circumscribed type that is of real interest. Hirsch's main concern is to develop a concept of this 'intrinsic genre', the type that 'lies somewhere between the vague, heuristic genre idea with which an interpreter always starts and the individual, determinate meaning with which he ends' (1967, p. 81). Much of the central contention of *Validity in Interpretation* have never been rebutted. Yet it was denied by those who found easy New-Critical or structuralist habits hard to break. And its emphasis on validity has been bypassed by an increasingly pragmatist theory. Nevertheless, his insistence that interpretation calls for inferences about intended meaning has been justified by recent developments in psycholinguistics and in the philosophy of meaning. It remains to be seen whether his theory can be adjusted to allow for local indeterminacies, and whether his concept of 'intrinsic genre'—a type distinct from full linguistic realization—will come to be accepted.

Another work of fundamental theoretical importance appeared about the same time: Roman Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* (1965). Ingarden's clear exposition of the stratified structures whereby literary works exist, although in itself generalized to a point fairly close to boredom, had

considerable explanatory power, and stimulated many detailed accounts of genre, by critics now better informed theoretically than the early annalists. For analysis of point of view, various narrational modes and the like, the work of the structuralist Genette has already been mentioned. Drier, but subtler and more penetrating is the phenomenological account in Félix Martínez-Bonati's *Fictive Discourse and the Structures of Literature* (trans. 1981). And a comprehensive account of narrative, enriched with many valuable examples, may be found in F.K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (trans. 1984).

As regards poetry, Ralph Cohen's monograph (1964) on Thomson's *Seasons* draws on prolonged theoretical considerations of the georgic mode; and some of the implications of this work are well brought out in his 'Innovation and Variation: Literary Change and Georgic Poetry' (1974). Cohen here comes to grips with the fundamental yet widely avoided problem of generic innovation. In passing, he makes the important point that genres change at a different rate from other literary conventions, so that they can be of great assistance in breaking into the hermeneutic circle. Other work of significant general import in this phase includes essays by W.D. Stempel (1970) and Hans Robert Jauss (1977), discussing the part played by genre in reception of a work.

Meanwhile the ideas of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein were being brought to bear on genre theory. Wittgenstein had shown that many groupings, such as games, are not hard-edged classes susceptible to rigid definition, but have a coherence which more resembles that of a family. Rather than defining characteristics, their members share family resemblances. By these a family is easily recognized; yet not all of them need be exhibited by any single individual member. This approach began to be applied to literature in a tentative way by several critics in the 1960s: for example Robert C. Elliott (1962), Maurice Mandelbaum (1965) and Graham Hough (1966). A sense of the impossibility of definition may also underlie Richmond Alexander Lattimore's *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy* (1964). Lattimore was unable to treat even Attic tragedy as a single class, and posited a less logically tidy arrangement distributing features among various subgenres or variant types (discovery tragedy, revenge tragedy and the like). Once the concept of family resemblance was introduced, its further application had a natural inevitability. All subsequent genre theory, it seems, must take account of the Wittgensteinian insight.

Thoroughgoing application of family resemblance theory came with Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* (1982), an attempt to construct, if not a comprehensive theory of genre, at least a speculative description of the entire field. Considering genres as families made it possible, even obligatory, to adopt a diachronic approach, and so offered a fresh approach to the problem of historical change. For Fowler, the so-called fixed historical kinds are not at all fixed, but mutable,

continually renewed repertoires of characteristic features (external structure, rhetoric, topics and the like). Such repertoires are not a means of classification so much as a resource of signs in a language or coding system that allows economical yet intelligible communication. Change of the repertoires is continual, for new works signify precisely by their modulating of specific previous states of the genre. Hence their own addition to it modifies the existing state, and a series of such successive changes may alter it almost out of recognition. From these changing kinds, however, less volatile 'modes' may be abstracted, consisting not of complete repertoires, but only of a few representative features, mostly rhetorical. These modes can be applied in the deliberate mixture of genres, whether local or pervasive, that most literary events consist of. Throughout, *Kinds of Literature* represents genre as a continually dynamic metamorphosis whereby, in the course of history, kinds are assembled, become more consciously practised (Lewis's 'secondary genre'), form the basis of modes, enter into temporary mixtures, hybrids or modulations, and combine to form new kinds. By this diachronic approach, Fowler attempted at once to overthrow the basis of traditional genre theory, and at the same time to argue that many ancient ideas of genre only need recasting and new application for them to be relevant to modern literature.

Philosophically, Fowler's ideas represented an unsatisfactory amalgam of Wittgenstein, Carnap and the non-structuralist element in Saussure; and he overestimated the part played in interpretation by coding. But he addressed a clear need, and made some contributions, such as the distinction between generic labels and actual genres (which change independently), or the idea of multiple stages in formation (particularly his 'tertiary genre', that is, symbolic transformation of a secondary genre). Perhaps, too, the frequency of his examples may encourage theorists to come to grips with more of the complexity of genre in actual literary history.

The same need to review traditional genre theory was addressed by others in very different ways. Heather Dubrow's *Genre* (1982) is an introductory essay without pretensions to original theorizing. But in fact it clears a great deal of ground economically, and its sensitive treatment of the part played by genre in interpretation (heuristic, rather than determinative) breaks new paths. Adena Rosmarin's *The Power of Genre* (1986), by contrast, attempts an ambitious general theory of genre from a structuralist standpoint. Rosmarin rejects all notions of inductive procedure and descriptive validity; her criterion of good genre criticism is simply explanatory power. Only by virtue of this power, indeed, do genres themselves exist; and when better 'explanations' or genres come along, they replace the former. Many critics doubtless think in such terms of definitions and classes; and deductive inferences almost certainly form part of our automatic mental processing. But only the absence of examples from Rosmarin's highly abstract book enables her to identify such processes with an adequate critical response. (Even reading—let alone criticism—continually enriches logical



procedures by imagination.) Rosmarin is almost always extremely clear, and clearly discloses how much the synchronic structuralist approach is bound up with nineteenth-century metaphysical concepts of generic classes.

Others have turned to the question of how different genres are related in groups, or to the idea of systems of genres. Paul Hernadi's *Beyond Genre: New Directions of Literary Classification* (1972) offers a useful survey of genre theories, but tends to take up a rather uncritical stance towards various 'maps' or diagrams purporting to set out the true geography of genre in some unspecified mental space. Ernst Robert Curtius adopted a more factual, diachronic method in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), a classic study tracing many historical schemes of genres. This approach is developed in greater detail, and a good deal more subtly, by Claudio Guillén. Guillén's *Literature as System* (1971) analyses many different versions of the tripartite division of literature, and could be interpreted as demonstrating the invalidity of such imposed schemes.

From the work of these and other learned comparatists, a better understanding has emerged of the way in which each literary period privileges certain genres, and erects what amount to revised generic hierarchies—as in seventeenth-century England, for example, epigram, georgic and satire were revalued; or in the nineteenth century, lyric and novel. This line of thought has recently been elaborated into extended studies of the literary canon, some of them with narrowly political motivations. But can literature and its genres properly be said to operate as a system? The most rigorous contemporary theorizing seems to call this into question, while suggesting that, in the heuristic processing of assumptions of genre, neighbouring and contrasting relations have a useful function.

The most interesting recent work on genre, however, is found less often in these very theoretical studies than in descriptions of individual kinds or modes. Here one might instance Guillén's accounts of picaresque, summarized in *Literature as System* (1971), or of the epistle (Guillén, 1986). Rosalie Colie's brilliant evocation of Renaissance genres in *The Resources of Kind* (1973) has stimulated many other genre studies, as has Barbara Lewalski's *Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning and Art of 'Paradise Regained'* (1966). To mention only monographs, Ian Donaldson's *The World Upside-Down* (1970), Colie's *Shakespeare's 'Living Art'* (1974), Lewalski's *'Paradise Lost' and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (1985) and Gordon Braden's *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (1985) are some of the best of these. Descriptions of Renaissance genres naturally predominate; but there has also been outstanding medieval work, such as John Stevens's *Medieval Romance* (1973) and A.C. Spearing's *Medieval Dream Poetry* (1976). So far as modes are concerned, an influential account of pastoral is

Thomas G. Rosenmeyer's *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric* (1969). And on comedy, particularly the carnival element, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1968) and his interesting but loosely argued *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (trans. 1981) have had comparable influence. Hybrid kinds have attracted some of the most interesting studies: notably Madeleine Doran's *Endeavours of Art* (1954) and Cyrus Hoy's *The Hyacinth Room* (1964), both largely concerned with tragi-comedy (which is treated by the latter as a mode revived by Samuel Beckett).

For periods more recent than the eighteenth century, there is very little genre theory to go on; so that critics are obliged to engage in the primary task of labelling appropriate groupings and perhaps describing them for the first time. From E.M. Forster (*Aspects of the Novel*, 1927) and Robert Liddell (*A Treatise on the Novel*, 1947) onwards, an army of critics has attempted to describe 'the novel' or to distinguish its subgenres. (Among the latter, Peter Garrett has identified an unusually distinct form in *The Victorian Multiplot Novel*, 1980.) With modernism, if not earlier, groupings become often highly conjectural, and tend to have too little consensus even for useful debate. An example is the grouping proposed in Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), which may be felt to have something less than unitary force. On the other hand, there is fairly wide agreement on a narrative genre often called metafiction, which is characterized by features, such as damaged verisimilitude, that draw attention to the work's artefactual status. Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1981) and Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction* (1984) are discernibly concerned with more or less the same grouping.

And, even within this, many would agree on another, still more specific, group of narratives, in which a character may be engaged in writing, and there are inset texts or works of art, displaced symbols of creativity, or talk of papers and writing materials. Fowler may label this the *poioumenon* (work making itself) or work-in-progress novel; Steven Kellman (1980) may label it 'the self-begetting novel' but they largely agree on the extent and characteristics of the grouping. With so much agreement, it is hard to believe that the accounts do not have some descriptive validity, at least of a temporary character. Other modern generic identifications include subgenres of the short story. And, in one of the most exciting recent developments, several scholars have proposed an alternative form of epic (the Callimachean epic: short, complex, discontinuous) largely excluded from traditional genre theory. A good introduction to this topic is John Kevin Newman *The Classical Epic Tradition* (1986). It would also be true to say that divine comedy is a mode now beginning to be better understood than at any time since the Middle Ages.

But much remains to be done, particularly in identifying contemporary poetical genres and relating them to their tradition. Such is the deficiency of genre theory in this area that when, against the odds, a modern kind is identified—such as ‘the poem on a picture’—the response in terms of emulative output is almost overwhelming. Thus, there have been three recent anthologies of picture poems, a Gale bibliography listing thousands of exemplars, a national competition and two exhibitions at the Tate. When contemporary literature is more fully studied in this way, it may not look so very different from the literature of traditional genre theory, with its lists of familiar kinds.

The more general of the genre theories described so far are comparatively external and superficial, consisting in the main, as they do, of empirical enumeration of generic features, with only desultory attempts to explain their interconnection. Clearly we now need more focus on the actual functions of these characteristics. In recent decades, fortunately, the functioning of individual literary elements has been the topic of many quite detailed studies, particularly within the freer environment of narratology, untrammelled by traditional theory. Good examples of this trend are Michael Irwin, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (1979), and Mary Ann Caws, *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction* (1985). So far, most of these studies—pursued, as they were, within the unreal world of ‘the novel’—have been innocent of generic considerations. But similar methods could be applied to features differentiated by genre. How does this descriptive device actually function, one might enquire, in works exemplifying a particular genre, as distinct from how it works in others? How does novelistic framing differ from romantic, say, or dramatic, or elegiac? Such an approach may prove to be a valuable avenue for future genre criticism.

On a broader front, genre critics like all others will have to come to grips with modern concepts of meaning, such as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s theory of relevance (1986). As Sperber and Wilson have made very clear, coding and decoding—and that must include generic codes—play only a limited part in communication and interpretation, which are largely a matter of small-scale inferences guided by relevance. The principle of relevance operates at every stage. In the case of literary interpretation, relevance must necessarily be to readers’ own cognitive environments—even to their own interests. But, whether they know it or not, they are also continually guided by relevance to what they assume to be the writer’s intentions. (These promise, after all, the pleasure of recognizing intended harmonies.) Generic organization may be conjectured to facilitate interpretative inferences at almost every level of structure.

If it is true that readers do not so much decode as select the most accessible relevant inferences, then those of them who are familiar with appropriate genres will access the topics and formal conventions of these first, and so form assumptions of intended meaning more easily. Organization

according to genre offers a rich encyclopedia of mutually related words, formal patterns, ideas, emotions and shared assumptions, on which readers automatically draw for relevant items. Subsequently, of course, good readers further enrich this relatively crude communication of meaning with many inferences—doubtless including some based on the individual writer's relation to his generic group, or on his known eccentricities, originality and the like. Thus, the idea that genres constitute horizons of meaning may not be wrong, so much as lacking in explanatory detail. To determine just how relevance theory applies to the generic element in communication must surely be an early objective for genre theory.

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