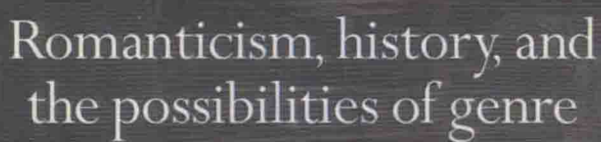


Romanticism, history, and the possibilities of genre

Edited by Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright

ROMANTICISM, HISTORY, AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF GENRE

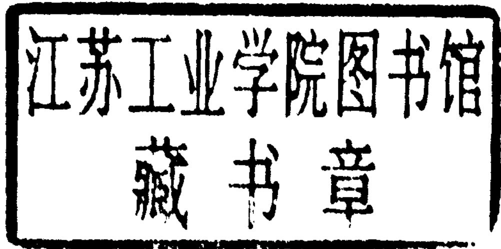
Re-forming literature 1789–1837

EDITED BY

TILOTTAMA RAJAN

AND

JULIA M. WRIGHT



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Romanticism has often been associated with the mode of lyric, or otherwise confined within mainstream genres. As a result, we have neglected the sheer diversity and generic hybridity of a literature that ranged from the Gothic novel to the national tale, from monthly periodicals to fictionalized autobiography. In this new volume some of the leading scholars of the period explore the ways in which the Romantics developed genre from a taxonomical given into a cultural category, so as to make it the scene of an ongoing struggle between fixed norms and new initiatives. Focusing on non-canonical writers (such as Thelwall, Godwin, and the novelists of the 1790s), or placing authors such as Wordsworth and Byron in a non-canonical context, these essays explore the psychic and social politics of genre from a variety of theoretical perspectives, while the introduction looks at how genre itself was rethought by Romantic criticism.

ROMANTICISM, HISTORY, AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF GENRE

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Finally Judith Thompson's "'A Voice in the Representation': John Thelwall and the Enfranchisement of Literature" is also a considerably revised and expanded version of her paper "John Thelwall and the Politics of Genre 1793/1993," which appeared in a special conference issue of *The Wordsworth Circle*, 25: 1 (1994), 21–25.

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Introduction

Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright

Genres are often seen prescriptively as a means of interpellating the subject into existing norms and hierarchies. Tzvetan Todorov, however, may well be closer to articulating the essential fluidity of the category when he argues that genres often originate as speech acts, though not all speech acts are immediately institutionalized as genres. If genres are confined to "the classes of texts that have been historically perceived as such,"[1] their classification is inevitably bound to the ideology of a society that chooses to encode only certain forms as genres. On the other hand the fact that there are uncategorized speech acts with the potential to become genres leaves a space for individual or collective intervention in existing system(s) of genre which must therefore be considered highly unstable. This situation is further complicated because the discursive and metadiscursive existence of genres do not necessarily coincide: a genre may have existed in the early nineteenth century but may not have been named until recently. Both in literary practice and in our discussions of it, genre is thus the site of a constant renegotiation between fixed canons and historical pressures, systems and individuals.

The essays collected here focus on genre as the privileged locus for a revaluation of cultural values, both because Romantic literature is characterized by its generic experimentation, and because the aesthetics of the long Romantic period correspondingly edges towards what seem "modern" questions about genre, its historicity, the very viability of the category, and the viability of the hierarchies by which generic law is maintained. In the Renaissance generic options also proliferate as thematic criteria replace the formal and technical differentials used by the Aristotelian tradition, but these genres (of which Scaliger lists over a hundred)[2] are arrayed in synchronic rather than diachronic fashion. Romantic critics, however, show a new awareness of the historicity and even the

cultural specificity of genres. Thus Peacock postulates four ages of poetry, in the last of which, the age of bronze, poetry itself becomes obsolete at the hands of prose. Shelley famously counters in *The Defense of Poetry* by insisting on the transhistorical nature of a "Poetry" that differs from narrative and drama in not being subject to material contingency, but it is clear that his refusal to historicize genre is itself a historical response to a new generic economy. Like Peacock, Victor Hugo in the "Preface" to *Cromwell* periodizes literature, identifying the lyric, epic, and dramatic forms with the primitive, ancient, and modern epochs respectively.[3] Clara Reeve (and later Friedrich Schelling) recognize that genres which are culturally exhausted die or are displaced into other genres, as in the survival of epic and romance through the novel.[4] Sometimes these histories are deterministic in matching periods to genres and modes, as in the case of Peacock and Hugo. Alternatively, when they see genre as a scene of cultural competition (as Reeve does in mapping the struggle between novel and romance), they tend to harness ideology for the purposes of education rather than to critique it.[5] Nevertheless the emphasis of these critics on historicity is the condition of possibility for what it stops short of: namely an analysis of genres in terms of their specifically ideological investments, and of ideology itself as chosen and capable of modification rather than as historically predestined.

We shall return to the specific ways in which issues of culture and canonicity are played out even in the relatively conservative "histories" described above. But it is important to recognize that the Romantics (particularly in Germany) do not restrict themselves to seeing genres as determinate and singular categories monolithically identified with certain time-spans. Thus Hegel's *Aesthetics* likewise constructs a grand narrative in which a succession of *Gestalten* or modes (the Symbolic or Oriental, the Classical, and the Romantic) is seemingly matched to a series of art-forms (architecture, sculpture, and poetry/painting/music). But Hegel also sees each art-form as passing through its various modes, thus creating a system of permutations that recognizes style or mode as a cultural category, while deploying it as an analytic tool as well as a historical determinant. Nor does everyone follow Hugo in using "history" to maintain a restricted economy organized around what Alastair Fowler calls the "central" genres of lyric, drama, and epic, with "extended literature" relegated to an uncertain periphery.[6] Goethe

has indeed been seen as the father of a canonically "Romantic" system confined to the central genres, which he normalizes as the three "natural" forms of poetry,[7] and this transcendental classification is also assumed by Shelley, who discusses only poetry, "story," and drama. But Friedrich Schlegel's famous distinction between natural and invented poetry (*Natur-* and *Kunstpoesie*) locates these natural forms only in classical literature, while identifying "romantic" or "modern" literature with the invention of a variety of new genres. Although Schlegel initially uses his distinction to dismiss extended literature as "*interessant*" or trendy, he increasingly comes to valorize modern variety, and on closer inspection even finds this variety in classical literature. In effect he realizes that the distinction between *natural* and *invented* is metadiscursive: that it describes a difference between classical and Romantic *theories* of genre, rather than privileging the central genres because they came first.[8] Schlegel thus stands on the verge of a radical redefinition of genre, and raises an issue crucial to the essay by Jon Klancher with which this volume begins: namely the question of whether it is not only genres themselves, but also the way we systematize them, that is profoundly historical.

Schlegel's provocative statement that "every poem [is] a genre for itself" is not meant to render the term useless, especially given his insistence that we desperately "lack" a theory of genre. Instead he means to question not the usefulness of classifying but the "rigid purity" of the "classical" genres. According to Schlegel nothing is so insignificant that it cannot "contribute something to the definition of some species," and the "species" he mentions thus include everything from travel writings and Dutch paintings to sighs and kisses.[9] This new inclusiveness responds to the emphasis on original genius by William Duff and Edward Young,[10] and to a literary experimentation in which England was as prolific as Germany was rich in theory. It also takes up the expansion of the literary economy begun more empirically (and cautiously) by eighteenth-century critics who recovered marginal or antiquarian genres such as the ballad (in the case of Thomas Percy) or subcanonical genres such as romance (in the case of Richard Hurd and Clara Reeve).[11] But that Schlegel's examples include cultural as well as literary phenomena reflects another aspect of Romantic theory: namely its search for alternative vocabularies to the purely literary category of genre (Bakhtin's "chronotope" being a contemporary example). In the aesthetic

theory of the long Romantic period, "mode" and "mood" thus come to be as important as genre. These cognates, in turn, refigure the category of genre itself, unravelling the distinction between central genres and extended literature.

Modes are often thought of as adjectival derivatives of genre, so that "elegy" names a genre while "elegiac" desribes a mode that occurs across genres.[12] But the equivalent term in German Romantic aesthetics, though also thematic rather than formal, refers to a much broader category: whether it be Hegel's *Gestalt* – the "shape" assumed by a certain form of cultural consciousness – or Schiller's *Empfindungsweise* – meaning mode of experience, or sensibility. Thus conceived, "mode" radicalizes "genre" in two ways. To begin with, when Schiller distinguishes the terms in *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* by defining mode phenomenologically,[13] he also changes the way we approach genre, as an expression of (cultural) consciousness rather than a purely formal category. Secondly, the adjectival definition is inherently conservative in tying mode to a parental *literary* genre, such that the mode of pastoral can occur only when the (sub)genre of eclogue is already in place. But the modes discussed by Romantic theorists do not necessarily have antecedent genres. They can include forms of cultural sensibility such as Schiller's "sentimental," artistic styles such as the grotesque, or tropes that have been expanded into forms of experience, such as Kierkegaard's "irony." This looser usage persists in our own references to the "mode" of print. If modes are a mechanism for bringing new material into culture, they differ from subgenres because what they add is not restricted to what has been encoded as literature. By expanding literature to engage it with other areas of experience, modes also expand the range of genre, defined more narrowly as a "kind" with specific formal features. For the relationship between mode and genre is fluid, particularly where the mode generates the genre as a transposition into literature of changes occurring at the level of social life – as in the epistolary novel, discussed in two of the essays here.

Another cognate to genre is "mood" or *Stimmung*, traces of which exist in earlier theory, but which is first named and legitimized only in the Romantic period.[14] Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is exemplary in this respect, in that it approaches the sublime and the beautiful as others might approach romance and epic. What is significant in Kant is not the mood he analyzes, but the fact that he deems worthy

of discussion what Jean-François Lyotard describes as a pre-conceptual "representation" that exceeds what we can grasp in a "form."[15] Though the moods that concern us may be different, the recovery of melancholy as aesthetically significant material (discussed in Mary Jacobus' essay) has been invisibly helped by the Romantic emphasis on the feelings as having their own value. Like mode, mood therefore exerts a reciprocal pressure on the conservatism of genre. Not only does it make affect part of generic analysis, but by recognizing that affect may have "genres" that need to be named, it concedes that there are forms of subjectivity that fail to find expression in "genre" and for which new genres need to be found.

The essays gathered here explore with reference to Romantic texts the expansion, and at times questioning, of the category "genre" discussed so far in Romantic theory and criticism. With two exceptions they deal with non-canonical writers such as John Thelwall and Mary Hays or sub-canonical ones such as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, because the relative lack of criticism on them and thus of preconceptions about them makes it easier to locate their distinctiveness in the ways they extended genre. But it may be that our own reading of the six canonical authors (all poets) has normalized their work so as to fit it into the central genres, thereby protecting a notion of "literature" that was theoretically instituted in the Romantic period,[16] even as it was being questioned in the "unwritten poetics" produced by the writers themselves. Thus we can ask if Wordsworth has been read in certain ways (first approvingly and then critically) because his work has been represented by the mode of lyric, and whether a change in the generic lenses through which we see his texts might not shift the current figuration of his corpus as transcendentally idealistic.[17] Don Bialostosky's essay is precisely such an attempt to defamiliarize Wordsworth by reading the *Lyrical Ballads* not as a homogenization of differences within the central mode of lyric, but as an experiment with extended genres that forces us to rethink how we ourselves classify speech acts.

The essays in this volume share a further assumption. In a curious return to the matching of periods with genres characteristic of some Romantic criticism, modern critics often identify Romanticism with the mode (if not the genre) of lyric, thus allowing us to critique the transcendentalism of the "Romantic ideology."[18] Our contributors, however, start from a sense that many Romantic writers are between

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