Genre

Heather Dubrow

The Critical Idiom

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Preface

This is a comparatively short book on an indubitably large topic and, like the other volumes in the Critical Idiom series, it is directed to an audience ranging from students to scholars. These conditions have made it necessary to define and delimit the scope of the book with care. My title is in the singular, not the plural: this study aims to explore general principles about genre and discusses the characteristics and the histories of particular literary forms only as they illuminate those principles. If it had alluded to every significant critical statement on genre, the book would have become a mere list of names, virtually an unannotated bibliography for the subject rather than an examination of it. I have, therefore, focused my historical discussion on a fairly small sample of theorists, selected either because they are so representative of a particular school or a particular age that studying them would be especially illuminating, or because they are so important in their own right that not studying them would be particularly unfortunate; and, though one obviously could not survey genre theory without examining classical and continental rhetoricians, I have given especial attention to the Anglo-American tradition.

In one regard, however, I have interpreted the topic of the book broadly, including examples of sub-genres, modes and some other literary types to which certain readers would deny the name genre. Adopting a more rigid definition would have demanded the exclusion of several important and intriguing forms, such as the pastoral elegy, that would definitely be called genres according to some interpretations of the term. In any event, my observations about

types like these do apply with equal force to other types that all critics would agree in considering genres.

Quotations are based on the standard editions of the writers in question; in accordance with the series, however, spelling and punctuation have been modernized and documentation confined to brief references within the text.

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Introduction

> Most critical efforts to handle such generic terms as 'epic' or 'novel'
> are chiefly interesting as examples of the psychology of rumor.
> (Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*)

Assume that the following paragraph opens a novel entitled
Murder at Marplethorpe:

> The clock on the mantelpiece said ten thirty, but someone had
> suggested recently that the clock was wrong. As the figure of the
> dead woman lay on the bed in the front room, a no less silent
> figure glided rapidly from the house. The only sounds to be
> heard were the ticking of that clock and the loud wailing of an
> infant.

Now read it through again, this time pretending that it appears
under a title like *The Personal History of David Marplethorpe* and
represents the first paragraph of a *Bildungsroman*, the narrative
genre that traces the maturation and education of its hero.

In the first instance, our assumptions about detective fiction
inevitably shape many of our responses. We mentally file the
allusion to the clock as a clue that might later help us to identify
the murderer. We interpret the inaccuracy of that clock not as a
symbolic statement about time but rather as part of a game the
author is playing to confound our own detective work; hence we
become alert for any further clues about the peculiarities of this
unreliable machine – can the person who commented on it be
trusted? has anyone observed the butler tampering with it? The
woman on the bed, we assume, is likely to be the victim, and the
'no less silent figure' may well be the murderer himself. Perhaps
the crying of the baby merely provides an appropriately melancholy

atmosphere, or perhaps it represents yet another clue (has its nursemaid abandoned it for more nefarious pursuits? has the murderer disturbed it, and, if so, what might that fact indicate about his route through the house?).

When, however, we assume that exactly the same paragraph is the opening of a *Bildungsroman*, we respond very differently. The reference to the clock once again seems to be a clue, but a clue in quite a different sense: we read that allusion symbolically, as a hint that time is disordered in the world that our novelist is evoking. In this case we become alert not for additional details about the mechanics of the clock but rather for further images of and ideas about time. We are much more likely to assume that the woman has died of natural causes. Above all, we focus far more attention, and a far different type of attention, on that noisy baby. Because the *Bildungsroman* so often opens on the birth of its central character, the possibility that the infant will be the protagonist might well flash through our minds, leading us to speculate, though perhaps subconsciously, that the dead figure is his mother and the silent one either his distraught father or an unsuccessful midwife.

What these two radically different readings reflect, of course, is the significance of literary form or genre: as we interpret the paragraph we are inevitably, though perhaps unwittingly, responding to generic signals. While certain of the problems that we will explore in this book will invite us to adduce the most arcane literary methodologies and the most abstruse literary theories, the significance of genre in the passage at hand is best clarified by an analogy from everyday life; one reason genre is so intriguing a concept is that it is related both to very specialized technical issues and to very broad human ones. One of the closest analogies to the experience of reading our hypothetical opening paragraph, then, is that of operating within a social code: genre, as many students of the subject have observed, functions much like a code of behavior established between the author and his reader. When we agree to attend a formal dinner, we tacitly accept the assumption that we

will don the appropriate attire; the host in turn feels an obligation to serve a fairly elaborate meal and to accompany it with wine rather than, say, offering pizza and beer. Similarly, when we begin to read a detective novel, we agree to a willing suspension of disbelief. We may, for example, be expected to accept the unlikely proposition that our detective is gifted with quite uncanny acuteness, or that half a dozen otherwise normal people are all possessed with a motive for murder and have all gathered on the same houseboat. At the same time that it leads us to accept these improbabilities, the generic code enjoins the writer from breaking certain other laws. Were we reading a science fiction story or a Gothic tale, we would be quite prepared to believe that a murder had been committed by a ghost, but if the author of our putative *Murder at Marplethorpe* later revealed that his 'no less silent figure' was in fact a spirit, we would feel betrayed. Our annoyance would stem not from the fact that the writer had violated the laws of nature but rather that he had violated those of the code.

Generic prescriptions also resemble social codes in that they differ from culture to culture and in that they may in fact be neglected, though seldom lightly or unthinkingly. A guest may indeed choose to arrive at that dinner party sporting the most casual of clothes, but if he does so he is issuing a forceful statement about his attitudes to dress codes or even to social codes in general. If the author of a *Bildungsroman* sedulously refuses to refer to his hero's birth at the beginning of the novel, as Laurence Sterne so wittily does in *Tristram Shandy*, we are aware that he is making an important point about the *Bildungsroman* or about the type of experiences that it normally portrays.

Readers have often noted that genre invites yet another analogy from daily experience: the way a social institution, such as an established church or a legislative body, functions. It is often possible to challenge such institutions, sometimes to overthrow them, but it is virtually impossible simply to exclude them from our lives. Because so many members of the culture do accept them, an attempt to ignore them acquires intensity and resonance and

begins to seem a judgment on the institution or a rebellion against it, rather than an act born of mere indifference. The man who leaves his hat on in church will often be considered actively hostile to religion; the writer who composes a sonnet about a promiscuous Dark Lady will appear not simply to be disregarding the conventional Petrarchan sonnet but rather to be flouting it, to be commenting on its dangerous inadequacies. Moreover, much like a firmly rooted institution, a well-established genre transmits certain cultural attitudes, attitudes which it is shaped by and in turn helps to shape. A school curriculum at once reflects and generates assumptions about history; the *Bildungsroman* embodies presuppositions about when and how people mature and in turn encourages its reader to see that process of maturation in the terms the novel itself has established, even when he encounters it outside the novel.

Though the effects of genre are manifest and manifold, working out a precise definition of the term can prove curiously difficult. As its etymological roots in the Latin word *genus* (kind) would suggest, 'genre' basically alludes to literary types and hence theoretically could be applied to lyric, tragedy, the novel, the sonnet, drawing-room comedy and so on. But the obvious distinctions between forms like the ones juxtaposed on that list have led a number of critics to attempt to define genre more narrowly. Many maintain that narrative, drama and lyric demand to be distinguished from types like the *Bildungsroman* and the epigram: the three forms that comprise that important triad are much broader than others, and they are further distinguished by the fact that they recur throughout Western literature. The term 'mode' is often assigned to those three literary kinds, as well as to certain others that may be said to transcend particular cultures, such as pastoral and romance; adapting the terminology of the influential German critic Karl Viëtor, some writers label such types 'universals'. At the opposite end of the scale, certain forms appear significantly narrower than the ones that we should comfortably call genres; thus it seems sensible to apply a label like 'sub-genre' to such types

as drawing-room comedy, the novel of manners and the country-house poem.

Even after attempting to delimit the idea of genre in these ways, we are confronted with a large range of literary kinds whose claims to the title remain viable but debatable, depending as they do on exactly what we think a genre is and hence what characteristics we take into account when deciding whether to grant that label to a given literary type. Classical writers tended to emphasize meter as a determining factor. Accepting prosody as at least one determinant, most modern critics in England and America would call forms like the sonnet genres without hesitation; but other theorists, preferring to exclude metrical patterns from their consideration of genre, insist on placing types like the sonnet into a separate category, sometimes termed 'fixed forms'.

In any event, no one could claim that prosody is the sole determinant of genre in English literature. In some instances, it is subject matter that is decisive – witness the epithalamium, which is by definition a poem about a wedding, or the funeral elegy which is, of course, a poem about a death. When analyzing tragedy, Aristotle describes not only the subject matter appropriate to that genre but also the effect it should have on its audience – 'the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place' (p. 49) – and hence anticipates the emphasis many recent critics have placed on the affective qualities of genre. Thus in his study of the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov maintains that what is central to that genre is not the subject matter *per se* but rather the state of mind it induces: an uncertainty about how the events are to be interpreted. Less tangible characteristics like attitude and tone often play a significant role too; René Wellek and Austin Warren apply the useful term 'inner form' to these qualities and in so doing distinguish them from the components of 'outer form', such as prosody.

Many genres, of course, are determined not by one of the factors we have been enumerating but rather by an interaction between

several. Its subject matter, its tone and its proclivity for certain
stanzaic patterns all figure in our definition of an ode. Nathaniel
Hawthorne's suggestive descriptions of the romance are worth
quoting at some length, for they draw attention to the subtle
amalgamation of qualities that may be said to constitute the form
in question. Among the issues he touches on are the mood, setting,
narrative techniques and subject matter that he deems appropriate
for his literary form, as well as its effects on the reader:

> When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be
> observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its
> fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself
> entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The
> latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute
> fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and
> ordinary course of man's experience. The former − while, as a
> work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins
> unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the
> human heart − has fairly a right to present that truth under
> circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or
> creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmos-
> pherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen
> and enrich the shadows of the picture. . . . The point of view in
> which this tale comes under the romantic definition, lies in the
> attempt to connect a by-gone time with the very present that is
> flitting away from us. . . . When romances do really teach any-
> thing, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a
> far more subtle process than the ostensible one.
>
> (Preface, *The House of the Seven Gables*, pp. 1–2)

Hawthorne's pronouncements may also serve to remind us of yet
another problem that complicates the definition of genres: dif-
ferent literary cultures may, of course, apply the same name to
very different genres. It is not difficult to remember that the
romance as Hawthorne is defining it is not the same form as the
medieval narratives or the Renaissance dramas that bear the same

title; but the distinctions between, say, Greek and Elizabethan tragedy are at once subtle enough and significant enough to render the intrinsically hard task of defining tragedy even harder. Often, too, societies will impose different definitions on what is essentially the same genre; thus Latin poets were prone to categorize the elegy, like so many other forms, primarily in terms of its meter, while the writers who imitated that type during the English Renaissance often deviated from the prosodic patterns in their classical models and apparently considered the form to be determined instead by its subject matter and tone.

The major reason it proves so difficult to arrive at a simple and satisfactory definition of individual genres or of genre itself, then, is that the concept encompasses so many different literary qualities. Since the nineteenth century, critics have energetically pursued parallels between genres and biological species. One measure of the complexities that we have been noting and will continue to note throughout this study is that a psychological metaphor is more apt in many respects than a physiological one: I would suggest that, in the ways they are structured and the ways they function, genres are strikingly similar to human personalities. Like different personalities, different genres are distinguished from one another by which characteristics predominate: almost all poetic forms have predilections for certain prosodic patterns, just as almost all human beings have some urge to aggression, but the extent to which such tendencies are realized and their role in the total pattern of the psyche or the form in question varies tremendously. In comparing genres as in comparing different personalities, we find that various elements may assume the same function: some people express their aggressiveness by making satirical comments and others by playing team sports, while the kinds of order and repetitiveness created in one genre by an elaborate metrical pattern, may be built into other genres through, say, rhyme or narrative patterns instead.

2

The functions of genre

> It is easy to forget that the man who writes a good love sonnet needs
> not only to be enamoured of a woman, but also to be enamoured of
> the sonnet.
>
> (C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*)

Our two fictive fictions, *Murder at Marplethorpe* and *The History
of David Marplethorpe*, suggest some of the roles genre serves in
actual literary works – and in so doing indicate how much it has
affected writers and how much it can and should affect us as
readers. Since the time of romantic criticism, it has been fashion-
able to denigrate generic prescriptions by focusing on the ways
authors transmute or transcend them. Many contemporary critics
have reinforced this tendency by emphasizing the conflict between
the individual work and its literary predecessors; recent statements
on this subject range from the influential observations of Hans
Robert Jauss in his essay 'Literary history as a challenge to literary
theory' to the more extreme doctrines in Harold Bloom's *The
Anxiety of Influence*. In some important regards, of course, this
emphasis is justified: the creators of literary works, unlike the
creators of Danish Gruyère cheeses, seldom pride themselves on
the fact that their achievements are virtually indistinguishable
from the models behind them. But important though the conflict
between literary fathers and their sons, between conventional
norms and unconventional reforms may be, one needs to right the
balance, to begin a consideration of genre by stressing its sig-
nificance. We should remind ourselves just how much the choice
of a particular genre influences (and, of course, is influenced by)
decisions about content, tone and form.

Established genres – whether they be popular ones like the

detective novel ·or serious ones like the *Bildungsroman* − carry with them a whole series of prescriptions and restrictions, some codified in the pronouncements of rhetoricians and others less officially but no less forcefully established by previous writers. However problematical the statements on tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics* may be, there is no question but that they influenced works as diverse in their implied attitudes to tradition as Racine's *Phèdre* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. However differently Spenser and Herrick may interpret the moral and social significance of a wedding, the epithalamia of both poets are deeply indebted to the great Latin example of the wedding song, Catullus LXI.

These examples remind us that the respect for originality sometimes expressed by modern readers would bemuse and confuse many writers both in earlier centuries and in our own. The most distinguished authors, as well as their more mediocre contemporaries, freely adopt the plots they inherit from other writers − after all, most of the tales recounted by Chaucer's pilgrims are versions of well-known stories, and Shakespeare, like other Renaissance playwrights, bases most of his plays on plots so familiar that Ben Jonson could label one of them 'a mouldy tale'. Writers of all ages have borrowed the topoi of genres quite as frequently and quite as openly as they have borrowed plots.

The history of the epic exemplifies the force of generic conventions. Inspired by the great models that Homer created and guided by the principles that a number of rhetoricians enumerated, any poet attempting an epic writes with a deep awareness of the characteristics customarily associated with his chosen form. An epic, he recognizes, is generally a long heroic poem divided into units labelled cantos or books; its diction is elevated, its action sweeping in scope; more specific conventions include the invocation of the god or gods who will preside over the work, the roll-call of heroes, and the description of the protagonist's armor. Despite the many and manifest differences between, say, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Byron's

Childe Harold, all of these epics are shaped by the conventions of their form.

Of course, as this list of poems alone would testify, the extent to which generic conventions are respected differs considerably from era to era and from writer to writer. Moreover, certain literary forms are associated with a great many conventions and others with only very few and very loose rules; the epic is an example, perhaps indeed the best possible example, of the first type of genre, and the novel of the second. Yet generic conventions retain considerable force even in the case of writers less intensely conscious of tradition than, say, Dante and Spenser, and in the case of genres less intimately associated with a whole host of traditions than the epic. Despite his iconoclasm even John Donne proves far more interested in traditional genres than many of his readers acknowledge; for example one of the lyrics in *The Songs and Sonets*, 'Break of Day', is clearly an *aube*, a type of love poem in which the lovers are being parted by the dawn:

> 'Tis true, 'tis day, what though it be?
> O wilt thou therefore rise from me?
> Why should we rise, because 'tis light?

(1–3)

Donne's lesser poetry testifies to his knowledge of and his respect for many popular Renaissance genres and their conventions: numbered among those poems are instances of the verse epistle, the epigram, the epithalamium, formal verse satire and the elegy.

When an author chooses to write in a given genre, he is not merely responding to the achievements and the pronouncements of others; he himself is issuing certain statements about his art and often about art in general. The very act of adopting a literary form, especially a well-established one, implies a respect for the past, or at least for one particular period or school within it. The medievalism that is trumpeted in the very name of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and manifested in the style of their paintings and the

subject matter of their poetry is no less evident in their repeated choice of the ballad, a genre that they believed had flourished in medieval England. While some readers dismiss Fielding's assertion that he is composing 'a comic epic-poem in prose' (Preface to *Joseph Andrews*) as a deliberately pompous joke, the phrase does serve to manifest the novelist's interest in the literature of the past and to lend respectability to the new literary form in which Fielding is writing by linking it to a far more established and far more respected form, the epic.

Decisions about meter and about stanzaic patterns often function in much the same way as ones about genre. When Pound adopts the classical metrical unit known as the sapphic in his lyric 'The Return', he is declaring his indebtedness to the achievements of the classical poets, and especially to the Greek poet, Sappho, who gave her name to this type of meter; and it is far from an accident that Pound chooses the sapphic for a poem that celebrates the renascence of the classical past. The medium is indeed the message. Other arts, too, offer suggestive analogues. François Truffaut's respect for American cinema in general and Alfred Hitchcock in particular is reflected in the way he borrows the cinematic genres associated with American film. By designing a skyscraper topped not by the customary flat roof but rather by a broken pediment, the contemporary American architect Philip Johnson paid a tribute to baroque architecture, a tribute that will be highly visible in both the literal and the figurative senses of that adjective and has already proved to be highly controversial.

As the instances of Pound and Truffaut testify, working in a genre can involve not only expressing one's indebtedness to literary tradition in general but also referring to, and glorying in, debts to particular predecessors. Pope's *Moral Essays* are so evidently based on Horace's *Sermones* that they indicate deep interest in, and even identification with, that poet. By shaping 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' in the form of a dramatic monologue, T. S. Eliot is implicitly drawing attention to his admiration for the Victorian predecessor who pioneered that form,