History and Genre*

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I

I CALL THIS PAPER "History and Genre" though history is a genre and genre has a history. It is this interweaving between history and genre that I seek to describe. In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson wrote that genre criticism has been "thoroughly discredited by modern literary theory and practice."[1] There are at least three reasons for this. First, the very notion that texts compose classes has been questioned. Secondly, the assumption that members of a genre share a common trait or traits has been questioned, and thirdly, the function of a genre as an interpretative guide has been questioned.

But what is this genre that has been discredited? The term "genre" is relatively recent in critical discourse. Previous to the nineteenth century the terms used for it were "kinds" or "species." Genre has its source in the Latin *genus* which refers in some cases to "kind" or "sort" or "class" or "species." But in others, "species" is considered a subclass of "genus." Its root terms are *genre, gignere*—to beget and (in the passive) to be born. In this latter sense it refers both to a class and an individual. And it is, of course, derived from the same root terms as *gender*. The connection of "genre" to "gender" suggests that an early use of the term was based on division or classification. Two genders are necessary in order to define one and sexual genders implied not merely classification but a hierarchy or dominance of one gender over the other. Genres included, in the Attic age, poems written in a distinctive meter like elegiac or satiric poetry. With regard to the number of genres, critics have suggested that every work is its own genre, that there are two genres—literature and nonliterature; that there are three genres—lyric, epic, and drama; that there are four genres—lyric, epic, drama, and prose fiction— and, finally, that genres are any group of texts selected by readers to establish continuities that distinguish this group from others. As one critic puts it, genre is "any group of works selected on the basis of some shared features."[2] Genre has been defined in terms of meter, inner form,

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intrinsic form, radical of presentation, single traits, family traits, institutions, conventions, contracts, and these have been considered either as universals or as empirical historical groupings.

In recognition of this multiplicity of definitions, I wish to argue that genre concepts in theory and practice arise, change, and decline for historical reasons. And since each genre is composed of texts that accrue, the grouping is a process, not a determinate category. Genres are open categories. Each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents, especially those of members most closely related to it. The process by which genres are established always involves the human need for distinction and interrelation. Since the purposes of critics who establish genres vary, it is self-evident that the same texts can belong to different groupings or genres and serve different generic purposes.

Have all the theories of genre from Menander to Morson been discredited? Contemporary critics continue to invest in genre, and I shall urge that there are critical tasks that can best be undertaken by genre. But it is necessary to understand what aspects, what assumptions of genre theory are being attacked. The first is that the classes or groupings that are called genres are no longer acceptable because we cannot be sure how to understand the texts as a class.

Michel Foucault states the general objection that dividing genre into groups like literature or philosophy is not useful since users of such distinctions no longer agree on how to take them. "We are not even sure of ourselves when we use these distinctions in our own world of discourse, let alone when we are analysing groups of statements which, when first formulated, were distributed, divided, and characterized in a quite different way."[3]

Jacques Derrida argues, characteristically, for the need and futility of genre designation. He points out that any generic classification system is untenable because individual texts although participating in it cannot belong to it. Individual texts resist classification because they are interpretatively indeterminate. He asks: "Can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in any way?"[4]

In putting the question in this manner Derrida wishes to confront all possible definitions of genre. For example, "literature" can be considered a genre which includes novel, elegy, tragedy, and so forth. It is a genre that includes other genres that define it; again, a genre can intermix genres—as a novel can contain poems, proverbs, sermons, letters, and so forth. The mark of belonging to a class need not be conscious (to author or reader) though it obviously is conscious

to the critic who notes it. Indeed, a work can refer to itself even in its title, as *The History of Tom Jones A Foundling* does, although subsequent critics and readers distinguish "history" from "novel." Or a text can refer to itself as a travel description when it is, like *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* by Lemuel Gulliver, an imagined prose fiction. For Derrida, no generic trait completely or absolutely confines a text to a genre or class because such belonging falsifies the constituents of a text. He writes: "If . . . such a [generic] trait is remarkable, that is, noticeable, in every aesthetic, poetic, or literary corpus, then consider this paradox, consider the irony . . . this supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class. The re-mark of belonging does not belong. It belongs without belonging . . ." (pp. 64–65).

Belonging without belonging. With it but not of it. Why should an author, reader, or critic wish to classify a work or to identify it as belonging with other works of a similar kind? What acts and assumptions are concealed in the infinitive *to identify?* After all, classifications are undertaken for specific purposes. Derrida assumes that such classes are determinate and thus fix a text within them—even though a text may be "fixed" in several different genres. But if one considers genres as processes, this criticism does not hold. Considerations of purposes are historical; different authors, readers, critics have different reasons for identifying texts as they do. The reasons for identifying texts differently do not interest Derrida; the identifications themselves do. He wishes to demonstrate that generic traits cannot *belong* to genres: "this supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class." And not because a text is "an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark" (p. 65). No text which is denominated "novel," for example, has traits that will identify all texts within the class.

Derrida both affirms and denies genre, and the basis for this inclusion and exclusion is the manner in which the individual text *participates* in the class and denies the class. Derrida does not pursue the historical inquiry of the types of "participation" involved in specific works; he assumes that all such participations are to be distinguished from "belonging." Indeed, for him, the individual text has so many contrary markings that participations undo belonging.

Derrida wishes to lead us away from the analysis of a class to an analysis of a text; textual interpretation will then support the paradox of belonging and not belonging. How persuasive is his undoing of a

class? He does not deny the necessity for grouping texts, for showing
that a text participates in a group. But he points out that "at the very
moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment,
degenerescence has begun, the end begins" (p. 66). No sooner is a
genre stipulated, than it proceeds to be ungenerated. But it must be
noted that this is a historical procedure—both the broaching of a
genre and the beginning of its end. For in order for the end to have
a beginning we must be in time; temporal history, however, insofar
as it pertains to the process of undoing, is not what Derrida examines.
By failing to do so, he takes a road that leads not to a history of
generic purposes in a study of individual texts, but to a study of
individual texts as distinct from genre. He creates a Herculean di-
lemma where none exists. Thus, to understand the aims and purposes
of genre, to understand beginnings and endings it is necessary to take
the road Derrida has not taken.

II

Francis Cairns points out that genres are as old as organized soci-
eties and that early genres were classifications in terms of content.
The functions of these were to aid the listener in making logical
connections and distinctions; generic distinctions aided him in fol-
lowing oral communications from the poet. Genre markers served to
distinguish one type of communication from another since such com-
munications shared many secondary elements. Oral communication
demanded primary markers. Members of the same oral genre shared
at least one primary trait for purposes of recognition by hearers.[5]
From these early beginnings of communication between poet and
audience, we can note that genres possessed social purposes in a com-
munity, and that genres arose to contrast, complement, define each
other's aims.

When an oral society is replaced by a literate one, the reasons for
generic classification undergo change. The functions of markers or
traits become the bases for value distinctions as well as for artistic
distinctions and interrelations. When Aristotle deals with tragedy, for
example, he lists plot as the primary marker within tragedy; he sug-
gests the proper model for tragedy and he compares tragedy with
epic in terms of generic value. He continues to note the interrelation
of genres by showing the similarities and differences in qualitative
elements and quantitative parts of tragedy and epic. "Again, tragedy
has everything that epic has (it can even use its metre), and moreover
has a considerable addition in the music and the spectacle, which

produce pleasure in a most vividly perceptible way. . . . So much for tragedy and epic, their nature, the number and differences of their qualitative parts, the reasons for success and failure in them, and criticisms of them and how to answer them."[6]

Even for Aristotle generic markers are not absolutes; they indicate stages through which a genre passes. Moreover, the traits that are shared do not necessarily share the same function. Trait sharing may be, but need not be, the way to characterize a genre. A genre does not exist independently; it arises to compete or to contrast with other genres, to complement, augment, interrelate with other genres. Genres do not exist by themselves; they are named and placed within hierarchies or systems of genres, and each is defined by reference to the system and its members. A genre, therefore, is to be understood in relation to other genres, so that its aims and purposes at a particular time are defined by its interrelation with and differentiation from others. Thus critics can classify a Shakespearean "tragedy" not merely as a tragedy, but as a poem, a performance, a narrative, and so forth, depending on the points a critic wishes to make. What is at stake is not some single trait that would place it in each of these classes, but the purpose for so classifying it within a generic system. Only if one dehistoricizes genre does the notion of classification with one or more traits shared by each member become a problem; such a claim would make it impossible for a class to undergo change since its traits would be essential rather than existential.

Contemporary critics do not find classification to be the purpose of genres, nor do they find that classifications serve evaluative purposes. When Northrop Frye sets up four genres based on the radical of presentation, he returns to the view that genres are rhetorical "in the sense that the genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public."[7]

The trait called "radical of presentation" is the marker of a genre: "Words may be acted in front of a spectator; they may be spoken in front of a listener; they may be sung or chanted; or they may be written for a reader" (p. 247). It is apparent that, given this single trait, Frye has to provide numerous qualifications and interrelations in the texts he consults. If Frye were a historical critic concerned with actual texts, he would proceed to illustrate the kind of interrelations that empirical critics develop, interrelations that show the choral chanting, riddling, and other oral devices in works acted in front of a spectator. He would undertake to explain how his genres interrelate historically with earlier genres as well as with each other. His efforts, however, are directed at traditions and affinities rather than the actualities of changing traditions and changing affinities. He knows that

genre is determined by conditions that vary between poet and public, and that the terms "conditions" and "public" are both problematic. Generic distinctions, he points out, "are among the ways in which literary works are *ideally* presented, whatever the actualities are" (p. 247). "Milton, for example, seems to have no ideal of reciter and audience in mind for *Paradise Lost;* he seems content to leave it, in practice, a poem to be read in a book" (p. 247). "The purpose of criticism by genres [writes Frye] is not so much to classify as to clarify . . . traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them" (pp. 247–48).

Frye's approach accepts the ideal of markers even though he has reservations about their use in practice. But he desists, in the *Anatomy*, from attributing the weakness of markers to different historical situations. The attempt to "recuperate" Frye's approach by historicizing it was undertaken by Fredric Jameson. He set out to convert aspects of Frye's approach to a Marxist theory of genres which coordinates "immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life" (p. 105). Jameson sees genre as a literary institution, as a social contract between a writer and a particular public "whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (p. 106). Like Frye, he argues that genres exist in performance situations, but he notes that genres do undergo changes: "as texts free themselves more and more from an immediate performance situation, it becomes ever more difficult to enforce a given generic rule on their readers" (p. 106). The generic contract can indeed be broken. "The generic contract and institution itself, . . . along with so many other institutions and traditional practices, falls casualty to the gradual penetration of a market system and a money economy. . . . The older generic categories do not, for all that, die out, but persist in the half-life of the subliterary genres of mass culture, transformed into the drugstore and airport paperback lines of gothics, mysteries, romances, best-sellers, and popular biographies, where they await the resurrection of their immemorial, archetypal resonance at the hands of a Frye or a Bloch" (p. 107).

The contract theory of genre avoids the concept of specific markers; it rests on an agreement between a writer and a particular public that specifies the proper use of a cultural artifact. But is there only one public that specifies "proper" use? And how can such a contract negotiate for the present, let alone for the future? Each new text that critics join to the genre results in interrelations with other genres. How does a contract come to be established and how is it

abrogated? How many contracts exist for the same text at any given time? Jameson claims that each genre is "immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right," but insofar as a genre retains past elements in a text, and insofar as different texts become members of a genre, how is this ideology determined?

Jameson's contract theory of genre presupposes a devolution of genres that follow the economic pattern, "the gradual penetration of a market system and a money economy." But the homology between genre and Marxist economic history disregards the contrasting aims of contemporary readers, as witness the diverse views about genre. Moreover, the reconceptualization of one genre often coincides with the initiation or restancing of others because of the process of interrelation. Thus a genre like tragedy continues despite the fact that it is reconceptualized by "domestic" tragedy; it is not abandoned despite serious changes in the economy. It seems a logical misstep to compare a kind of writing with an economic system rather than with the writings about an economic system. When such writings intersect with those of different genres they do not trivialize or dispose of such genres; they establish combinations that can make their contributions subservient rather than dominant in the genres that include them. As for genres possessing immanent ideologies, it would appear that such an assumption disregards the differences among the members of a genre. This is not to deny that texts—as generic members—can be interpreted as possessing ideologies, but rather that these cannot be deduced from generalizations about the genre.

For example, the characters, narrative, language—indeed all aesthetic strategies of Lord Jim—form, for Jameson, one specific instance of the symbolic act of the end of capitalist expansion. In the history of forms, Lord Jim "may be described as a structural breakdown of the older realisms, from which emerges not modernism alone, but rather two literary and cultural structures, dialectically interrelated and necessarily presupposing each other for any adequate analysis: these now find themselves positioned in the distinct and generally incompatible spaces of the institutions of high literature and what the Frankfurt School conveniently termed the 'culture industry,' that is, the apparatuses for the production of 'popular' or mass culture" (p. 207). Jameson argues that Lord Jim represents in its structure the breakdown of the novel as a genre in terms of what he calls "older realisms." From this breakdown emerge two literary or cultural structures that are interrelated—"necessarily presupposing each other for any adequate analysis"—institutions of high literature and the apparatuses for the production of "popular" or mass culture. Since my concern is with genre theory and how a member of the genre

"novel"— *Lord Jim,* for example—alters the genre while remaining a
member of the class, the question arises, How are we to understand
the persistence of a classification without charting the processes of
classification change? It is, after all, through interrelation and com-
petition with other genres, alterations or omissions of generic traits,
and so forth that a modernist text begins to replace an "older
realism."

My argument about text classes or genres can be summarized as
follows: Classifications are empirical, not logical. They are historical
assumptions constructed by authors, audiences, and critics in order
to serve communicative and aesthetic purposes. Such groupings are
always in terms of distinctions and interrelations, and they form a
system or community of genres. The purposes they serve are social
and aesthetic. Groupings arise at particular historical moments, and
as they include more and more members, they are subject to repeated
redefinitions or abandonment.

Genres are open systems; they are groupings of texts by critics to
fulfill certain ends. And each genre is related to and defined by others
to which it is related. Such relations change based on internal con-
traction, expansion, interweaving. Members of a genre need not have
a single trait in common since to do so would presuppose that the
trait has the same function for each of the member texts. Rather the
members of a generic classification have multiple relational possibil-
ities with each other, relationships that are discovered only in the
process of adding members to a class. Thus the claim that genre study
should be abandoned because members of a genre do not share a
single trait or traits can be seen not as undermining genre but as
offering an argument for its study. Aimed as an attack against an
essentialist theory, this claim fails to address those theories that begin
by denying essential generic traits altogether.

III

Finally there is the attack on genre as an interpretative guide. The
attack rests on two premises: that of genre and that of the text. With
regard to genre, the argument is that a class generalization cannot
help to interpret a specific member of the class; with regard to text,
the argument is that a specific text is indeterminate; thus no deter-
minate statements are useful in its interpretation. Genre defenders
have at least two important answers: genres provide expectations for
interpretations, and, a variant of this, genres provide conventions for
interpretation. Elizabeth Bruss, for example, writes: "The genre does

not tell us the style or construction of a text as much as how we should expect to 'take' that style or mode of construction—what force it should have for us. And this force is derived from the kind of action that text is taken to be."[8] A knowledge of genre, says another critic, provides "invaluable clues about how to interpret" a poem,[9] and the strongest argument for generic expectations is made by Hans Robert Jauss. In his essay on theory of genres and medieval vernacular literature, he writes: "The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and 'rules of the game' familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced. Variation, extension, and correction determine the latitude of a generic structure; a break with the convention on the one hand and mere reproduction on the other determines its boundaries."[10] Jauss offers as an explanation of genre the view that "the relationship between the individual text and the series of texts formative of a genre presents itself as a process of the continual founding and altering of horizons" (p. 88). Jauss deals with the individual text as well as with a group of texts; yet it is difficult to see how a single text can fuse its horizons with a body of texts each of which has its own individual fusions.

The assumption of generic expectations makes or implies the claim that generalizations about a class can help interpret any particular instance of that class. What kind of expectations does *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet* or the genre tragedy offer us in understanding *Death of a Salesman* that we couldn't achieve without them? Such a conclusion does Jauss an injustice since the aim of his genre theory is to trace the succession of responses to a text and to explain its relation to society, author, and reader. He thus pursues history, in Jameson's terms, as a history of forms and as a history to be compared with histories of other genres and disciplines. Jauss seems minimally interested in how a text as a member of a genre is constituted. But such a procedure is necessary for an interpretative theory.

Jauss realizes that readers extend beyond the original responders to a text, and it is to the continuity or succession of responders that he turns in order to explain the responses a text elicits. One might, therefore, point out that whereas Frye directs his generic inquiry toward traditions and affinities that a writer has, Jauss directs his to the historical responses of readers who are governed by "rules of the game." But both, it should be noticed, are concerned with the changing responses toward a text and with textual affinities.

"Rules of the game" are but another name for "conventions," and some genre theorists argue for the interpretative importance of genre conventions. "Texts are . . . classified according to what I shall call

their 'semiotic nature,' [writes Gary Morson] which is to say, the con-
ventions acknowledged to be appropriate for interpreting them. . . .
Readers can and do disagree about conventions for interpreting a
work; when they do, I shall say they disagree about its genre. Strictly
speaking, therefore, I shall not be stating that given works belong to
certain genres. I shall, rather, describe the hermeneutic consequences
entailed by classifying a work as one of a particular semiotic type."[11]
This genre theory substitutes "reading conventions" for "genre," thus
avoiding the problem of generic consistency or constituents by
placing them upon "conventions." The notion of convention as a basis
for interpreting works within a class refers to "conventions acknowl-
edged to be appropriate for interpreting them." But conventions of
interpretation are themselves writings (or genre members) that con-
trol readings, and thus they are subject to the same kind of changes
that genres undergo. For example, conventions about treating a work
as literature are not conventions applicable to one genre but to all
genres included under the genre "literature." Moreover, the notion
of "convention" is clearly not shared by informed readers of the same
time since interpretative disagreements do indeed arise. My point is
not that interpretative conventions do not exist, but that they exist
within literary criticism and literary theory and that the attempt to
define such conventions merely leads—as the examples of Wolfgang
Iser, Stanley Fish, and Jacques Derrida illustrate—to different views
of reading conventions. If reading conventions fall within the genres
of criticism and theory, are we not involved in a circular argument?
Genres are identified by reading conventions. But reading conven-
tions are themselves parts of genres or genres. Thus reading conven-
tions are themselves involved in the problem of generic specification.

   The difficulty with this semiotic approach to interpretation is that
the critics assume "interpretation" exists nongenerically. If they con-
sidered interpretation as text- and genre-bound, as I have suggested,
they would be dealing with the changes in and transformation of
texts. They would thus be led to reconsider the function of textual
constituents and to analyze "conventions" in the same manner that
they analyze other generic texts.

   Consider Eric Havelock's discussion of the interpenetration of oral
procedures in written tragedy. Discussing orality as a genre that in-
cludes many oral genres, he illustrates that a number of the practices
characteristic of oral genres enter into Attic tragedy, and the example
he chooses for illustration is *Oedipus Rex*. "The *Oedipus* therefore is,
under one aspect, a personally produced product embodying a de-
gree of personal creativity. Nevertheless its composition, like that of
all Greek drama, involves a partnership between the oral and the

written, the acoustic and the visual, a dichotomy which can also be rendered in terms of tradition versus design, generic versus specific, communal versus personal. It is a combination which lies at the heart of all high classic Greek 'literature' from Homer to Euripides."[12]

The point to be made here is that an individual instance of a genre—*Oedipus Rex*—can reveal its individuality only by comparison with other tragedies within the genre and within the oeuvre of Sophocles, but also by comparison with older oral genres. The conceptual change brought about by literacy permits us to identify a historical process of change. This process includes the absorption of elements from nontragic forms to tragedy, and, in particular, to Sophoclean tragedy. If, in other words, we wish to study literature as an interrelated system of texts and society, generic distinctions offer us a procedure to accomplish this.

Havelock outlines the interpenetration of one type of orality in the plays of Sophocles. I quote: "The riddling of the *Oedipus,* then, while giving to this particular play a peculiar degree of dramatic tension, can be seen as a revival of a traditional device, mnemonic in character and having its roots in the habits of primary orality" (p. 190). Here a constituent of oral performance enters into a later form, and in doing so we can come to understand how a text is multitemporal. *Oedipus Rex* has sedimented in it elements from older genres or elements from earlier examples of the same genre. In this respect generic composition expresses diverse communal (or ideological) values.

Some defenders of genre theory find no inconsistency between the claim that texts are indeterminate and their own assumption that a text can have diverse interpretations. The expectations of readers change and the conventions of readings change and both these hypotheses are advanced by genre critics. I have indicated that these hypotheses can be made more adequate, but I do not find that they have been discredited. Critics who assume that every text is self-contradictory still have to grant that types of contradiction exist and that such types, including their own writings, presuppose generic groupings. The view of genre that I have been advocating has considerable potential for interpretation and literary history, and I shall indicate some of this in my final section.

IV

It is unfortunate that one of the difficulties with genre is that we have the same term to describe a genre like novel or a particular novel like *Finnegans Wake*. One designation for a whole and for parts

of the whole creates the impression of an organic linkage. But knowl-
edge of the relation between the genre "novel" and members such as
Austen's *Emma* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is useful for
literary study only if we can explain how they are continuous, how
discontinuous. What inquiries can a genre study undertake to explain
changes in individual texts or genres and literary and historical rea-
sons for them? One is to examine the different genres an author
undertakes; Joyce, for example, writes short stories, poems, a play,
novels, letters. What is involved in these generic variations? Another
is to relate generic changes to changes in the writing of history,
granting that there are special and general histories, Marxist and
other approaches to history. Another is to analyze the reasons for
generic omissions or neglect of genres that can be but are not written,
as the neglect of the sonnet after Milton until the end of the eigh-
teenth century. Another is to analyze generic transformations as, for
example, the "ballad" and the "lyric" are joined by Wordsworth to
form "Lyrical Ballads." Still another generic inquiry is to examine a
single narrative as it undergoes generic variations, becoming, in turn,
a ballad, a prose fiction, a tragedy, a memoir, as well as a member of
other genres. This is the inquiry I shall offer in order to consider the
potentialities of generic criticism. My assumption is that an author in
making a generic choice involves himself in an ideological choice, and
that the critic in reconsidering the generic choices he attributes to a
text involves himself in certain ideological, social, and literary
commitments.

There is an early seventeenth-century ballad (ca. 1600–1624)
called—in short—"The Excellent Ballad of George Barnwel." Like
most ballads, it was sung in the streets, and the sheets on which it was
printed—broadsides—usually wound up on the bottom of baking
dishes or in the fireplace. The ballad is a confession addressed to the
youths of London, and it serves as a moral warning at the same time
that it notes the erotic pleasures of immorality. Its subject matter
undergoes numerous generic transformations, indicating the persis-
tent audience appeal of sexual seduction, criminal licentiousness, and
parricide while paradoxically invoking the need for morality. The ac-
tion of the ballad is as follows:

1. George Barnwel, a youth apprenticed to a merchant, is accosted by a
   woman.
2. She is an experienced harlot and seduces him.
3. As a result of his infatuation and incapacity to resist sexual pleasures,
   she persuades him to embezzle his master's money. He does so and flees
   to her when his exposure is imminent.

4. She instigates him to murder and rob his rich uncle, and he does so.
5. When the money is spent, she betrays him to the authorities.
6. He escapes and betrays her to the authorities in turn and she is hanged.
7. He flees to Poland and is hanged for an unrelated murder.

This ballad was republished several times during the seventeenth century and at the end of the century there appeared a prose fiction chapbook based on the poem and to which was appended a version of the ballad. The poetic song with its first person narrative was converted into a third person prose narrative. The prose version has a different generic history from the ballad. It is modeled upon criminal biographies with quotations from Proverbs, a life history in outline, with episodes from fabliaux. Why should a popular form be rewritten in another popular form? (1) The rewriting is addressed to a more literate audience than the original since it goes into detail about the effects of the reading of classical romances. (2) It seeks to mitigate the criminality of Barnwel by making him an innocent who can't distinguish between an angel and a whore. (3) It makes the narrative more erotic while becoming more didactically religious. (4) It is an attack upon the dangers of reading pagan texts. The change of form nevertheless continues a narrative that is recognizably that of the original ballad. What we have, therefore, is a generic change that expands upon the narrative of the ballad, but selects certain features—like the character of the harlot—to concentrate upon. There is an antifeminism that surfaces in the prose version, and a structure that resembles other criminal biographies.

In 1731 the ballad was rewritten as a tragedy, called *The London Merchant*. Here we have an elevation of a low genre into a high one: a tragedy about common people addressed to common people, altering the genre of tragedy that characteristically was about kings and aristocrats and dealt with affairs of state. The subject matter and characters altered the constituents of the tragedy. In his introduction, the author, George Lillo, argued for the need to extend the characters and subject matter of tragedy to include common people and the events in which they were involved. What this implied was a conceptual change in tragedy. The genre was now a model for what critics called "domestic" tragedy. The question for the genre critic is why and how such a subgenre is initiated. The most obvious explanation is ideological: the plot of a known popular form becomes the subject of a traditionally elite one. The intermingling of the two suggests an elevation of the merchant's role that is one of the tragedy's themes. It also indicates a reshifting of the hierarchy of generic kinds. It will

not do to talk here about a reader's contract or reading conventions, since key sections of the "contract" are abrogated and conventions disregarded. This classification shift of ballad from subliterature to high literature involves generic procedures of transformation and incorporation too complicated to discuss here. But I can point out that the claim for the elevation of the ballad was made by Joseph Addison in a new genre, the periodical essay, a "newspaper" genre; it justified, by analogy, the periodical essay itself as a literary form. Moreover, ballad elevation was made analogous to the class elevation of the merchant. Generic consciousness is not, in the early eighteenth century, separated from social consciousness. It does not matter that critics parodied Addison's interest in ballads; what does matter is that his argument for genre elevation offered a procedure for treating class elevation. In this respect, generic considerations do indeed suggest that they can shape how critics look at social life rather than merely reflect it.

Some of the problems that such a genre theory invites includes the interrelation of forms; for example, in the ballad opera individual ballads become interrelated with music, dialogue, spectacle, and comedy. Then again, there is the phenomenon in which a single sonnet is joined to others to form a sequence. Or a single prose narrative or short story joined to form a series of stories.

In Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), which became the central transmission agency by which the ballad genre entered English literature, there was published a version of the Barnwel ballad. Percy rationalized ballads as literature by claiming they were individual compositions; he consciously sought to identify them with a national tradition and he sought to illustrate them as "literature" by including in his collection a number of esteemed contemporary poems. But an important aspect of this effort at gaining establishment acceptance of the popular genre was his editing of them. He imposed on Barnwel the standards of decorum and correctness practiced by established eighteenth-century poets, standards that he found consistent with the needs of his audience. He deliberately revised the ballad of George Barnwel, therefore, to meet their assumed social and literary criteria.

What conclusions can one draw about history and genre from this limited example? Most obviously, genres have popular and polite functions and statuses. Generic transformation can be a social act. Generic transformation reveals the social changes in audiences and the interpenetration of popular and polite literature. Within a common audience different genres complement or contrast with one another. Some processes of generic alteration—for example, of the

single text leading to a collective text (sonnet to sonnet sequence)—
tend to repeat themselves regardless of cultural change. The success
of one genre—for example, *The London Merchant*—can lead to ideo-
logical changes in an earlier genre—the ballad—now prepared for
an audience familiar with the tragedy. Generic differentiation serves
different ends, but each new rewriting of the ballad involves a selec-
tion from the original narrative. The ballad dealt with the mercenary,
the economic behavior of the prostitute, but the tragedy dealt with
the noble behavior of the merchant who had no role in the poem.
The elements selected thus provide a clue to the social and cultural
implications of genre. The process of sedimentation involves, in the
different genres, elements from other genres that preceded them.
Some of the ballad repetitions interpenetrate the prose fiction, and
others are explored in greater detail. Since genres are understood in
terms of their interrelation they can be seen as renewing a distance
which earlier genres sought to erase, to renew a justification for sep-
arating once again popular and polite literature, once ballads are
established as polite literature. Narrative can function to establish an
element of continuity among different genres and thus provide a
guide for historical continuity while making possible the recognition
of historical changes in attitude—to merchant, merchant's appren-
tice, and harlot.

   In this paper I have sought to answer three types of discreditation
of genre theory and to offer an alternative theory. The claim that
generic classes are indecipherable or indeterminate I have answered
by showing how to decipher them and how a process theory can
explain their transformability. The claim that members of a genre
share a common element or elements in consequence of which genre
is an essentialist study, I have answered by showing the historical
naiveté of this argument and by illustrating that genre theory is not
dependent on such essentialist assumptions. The claim that genre
cannot be a guide to interpretation I have answered by showing how
a process theory of genre explains the constituents of texts that it
seeks historically to explain. The whole direction of my paper may
thus be seen as a contribution to the regeneration of genre theory.

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NOTES

1   Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, 1981), p. 105; hereafter cited in
text.
2   John Reichert, "More than Kin and Less than Kind: The Limits of Genre Theory,"
in *Theories of Literary Genre*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka (University Park, Pa., 1978), p. 57.

3   Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), p. 22.
4   Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry*, 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1980), 64; hereafter cited in text. This essay also appeared in *Glyph* 7 (Baltimore, 1980), 176–232.
5   Francis Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1972), pp. 6–7, 34.
6   Aristotle *Poetics* 26 1462a–1462b.
7   Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 247; hereafter cited in text.
8   Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts* (Baltimore, 1976), p. 4.
9   Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London, 1982), p. 135.
10   Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception*, tr. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982), p. 88.
11   Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's "Diary of a Writer" and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin, 1981), pp. viii–ix.
12   Eric Havelock, "Oral Composition in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles," *New Literary History*, 16, No. 1 (Autumn 1984), 186.