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Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre

Fredric Jameson

O, she's warm!
If this be magic, let it be an art
Lawful as eating.

The Winter's Tale

I

THE REACTION AGAINST genre theory in recent times is a strategic feature of what must be called the *ideology of modernism*. And it is certain that of all literary works, so-called modernistic ones are the least classifiable according to traditional "kinds": witness the rise of a new and hybrid form in the novel, and in our own day, the emphasis on the incomparable uniqueness of the style and "world" of the individual writer. Yet the waning of the modern and the return to plot suggest that a reexamination of the question of genre may be in order.

Genres are essentially contracts between a writer and his readers; or rather, to use the term which Claudio Guillén has so usefully revived, they are literary *institutions*, which like the other institutions of social life are based on tacit agreements or contracts. The thinking behind such a view of genres is based on the presupposition that all speech needs to be marked with certain indications and signals as to how it is properly to be used. In everyday life, of course, these signals are furnished by the context of the utterance and by the physical presence of the speaker, with his gesturality and intonations. When speech is lifted out of this concrete situation, such signals must be replaced by other types of directions, if the text in question is not to be abandoned to a drifting multiplicity of uses (or *meanings*, as the latter used to be termed). It is of course the generic convention which is called upon to perform this task, and to provide a built-in substitute for those older corrections and adjustments which are possible only in the immediacy of the face-to-face situation. Yet it is clear at the same time that the farther a given text is removed from a performing situation (that of village storyteller, or bard, or player), the more difficult will it be to enforce a given generic prescription on a reader; indeed, no small part of the art of writing is absorbed by this (impossible)

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attempt to devise a foolproof mechanism for the automatic exclusion of undesirable responses to a given literary utterance.

Traditional genre theory has been understood as performing the distinct but related functions of furnishing specifications for the production of this or that type of composition, and of providing a typology according to which the various existing compositions may be sorted out by genus and species. In recent times, the first of these functions, with its so-called techniques and its literary recipes, has become the property of commercial literature, where the older genres continue to live the half-life of the various paperback lines, gothics, mysteries, bestsellers, and the like; while the second has become an almost exclusively academic or antiquarian enterprise, drawing its inspiration from nothing fresher than the classificatory ideals of early nineteenth-century science.

Still, it is hard to see how any genuine literary history could be written without the aid of something like a concept of genre. The genesis of an individual work, the development of an individual writer, might furnish illuminating footnotes to the story of overall cultural and literary change, but would surely never figure as the principal events it has to tell. Only the history of the forms themselves can provide an adequate mediation between the perpetual change of social life on the one hand, and the closure of the individual work on the other. Such a history is a social one to the degree to which it takes as its object a social institution, namely, the generic contract itself as a relationship between producers and public, while retaining the use of what are almost exclusively literary-critical instruments, inasmuch as its data must be drawn from precise and concrete experience of the works themselves.

When we look at the practice, rather than the theory, of contemporary genre criticism, we find two seemingly incompatible tendencies at work which we will characterize as the *semantic* and the structural or *syntactic* approaches respectively. A glance at some of the classic theorists of comedy will illustrate the distinction: for some, the object of inquiry is not the individual work but rather something like the comic vision, which may be seen as a more general or universal attitude towards life or form of being-in-the-world. Obviously, there is room for wide variation within this approach: thus, for Bergson, comedy is essentially an expression of society as a whole, and has the function of punishing deviance with ridicule and thereby preserving the social order; while for Emil Staiger, on the contrary, it constitutes one of the few avenues by which the fundamental absurdity of existence may be apprehended in a fashion still tolerable for the human mind.

Whatever the nature of the hypothesis, however, the advantage of this approach is surely that it aims explicitly at giving an account of the *meaning* of the genre; while just as clearly its weakness lies in the prospect of the invention of a whole series of imaginary entities and abstract personifications after the fashion of German idealism (the "spirit" of comedy, of tragedy, etc.), and of which Dilthey's elaborate system of *Weltan-*

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schauungen may serve as an instructive example. The conceptual operation involved in this particular approach may be characterized as the substitution, for the individual work in question, of some more generalized existential experience of which a description is then given which can range from the impressionistic to the phenomenologically rigorous. In this approach, the essence of genre is apprehended in terms of what we will call a *mode*.

For the second, or *syntactic* approach, such a method stands condemned out of its own mouth as intuitive and unscientific; the alternative is rather a view of comedy as a determinate laughter-producing mechanism with precise laws and requirements of its own, whose realization in the various media of theater or narrative, in film or in daily life, may be the object of analysis and synthetic reconstruction, resulting, not in the expression of a meaning, but rather the building of a *model*. We may further suggest the distance between these two general approaches by pointing out that the object studied by each has a different "opposite," or negation: for the phenomenological approach, the contrary in terms of which comedy will be defined will be another mode, that of tragedy, say, or of irony; while for the structural approach, the opposite will simply be the noncomic or the unfunny, the joke that falls flat or the farce that remains a dead letter.

This approach, whose monuments range from the lost chapters of Aristotle's *Poetics* to Freud's joke book, has the advantage of forcing even its ungifted practitioners to remain closer to the text itself. On the other hand, as Lévi-Strauss has suggested in his critique of Propp,[1] the danger of this kind of analysis lies in its susceptibility to a kind of mesmerization by the sheer empirical existence of the functions or mechanisms it uncovers, thus leading it to conclude (as does Propp himself in his classic work) with the peremptory but unsatisfying declaration that the structure in question is thus, and not otherwise. In this second, or structural approach, we will suggest, for want of a better term, that the genre in question is dealt with in terms of *fixed form*.

Judging from similar alternations in stylistic theory and in linguistics itself, this methodological hesitation between a structural analysis and a semantics of genre must find its ultimate source in the ambiguous constitution of language itself. It does not seem particularly rewarding to perpetuate it by continuing to choose sides in a dogmatic and sectarian spirit. Rather, let us see whether it may not be possible to turn the dilemma into a solution in its own right by making it the basis for some fresh hypothesis about the nature of genre. The latter would then be defined as that literary phenomenon which may be articulated *either* in terms of a fixed form *or* in terms of a mode, and which *must* be susceptible of expression in *either* of these critical codes optionally. The advantage of a definition like this consists not only in its exposure of false problems (thus, it would no longer make any sense to wonder whether the novel *as such* can be considered a genre, inasmuch as one cannot imagine any determinate literary mode which would correspond to such a "form"); but also

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in its capacity to generate new lines of research, for example, to raise the question of the nature of the *mode* to which such a fixed form as the historical novel may be said to correspond, or that of the *fixed form* of which a familiar mode like that of the romance may be said to be the expression.

Yet such a definition also, at least implicitly, includes criteria for judging the *completeness* of any given piece of genre criticism; and in what follows, we will use problems raised by the criticism of romance, if not as the basis for some new and substantive account of the latter, then at least as a framework for indicating the formal requirements which any really adequate account of such a genre must meet and the steps necessarily involved in fulfilling them.

II

The fullest account of romance as a *mode* has been given by Northrop Frye, with whose theory we therefore begin. Romance is for him a wish fulfillment or utopian fantasy, which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday reality, whether in an effort to restore it to the condition of some lost Eden or to inaugurate and usher in some new and ultimate realm from which the old mortality and imperfections have been effaced. To say that it is a wish fulfillment is not, indeed, to suggest that romance longs for total freedom from that everyday world or ordinary life: rather, "the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality *but will still contain that reality.*"[2]

To put it this way is therefore to turn our attention to those elements in the ordinary world which must be transformed, if the earthly paradise is to reveal its lineaments behind it: it then becomes clear that for romance such elements are conceived, not as the humdrum contingencies of an ordinary finite and mortal existence, but rather as the result of curse and enchantment, black magic, baleful spell, and ritual desolation. Not unnaturally, the forces capable of resisting this sinister power themselves partake of magic, this time of a white or theological variety. So romance comes to be seen as the struggle between the higher and lower realms, between heaven and hell, or the angelic and the demonic or diabolic:

> the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world. The conflict however takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, *our* world, which is in the middle, and which is characterized by the cyclical movement of nature. Hence the opposite poles of the cycles of nature are assimilated to the opposition of the hero and his enemy. The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth.[3]

Such a passage calls for several remarks. We may first of all feel some

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skepticism about the importance assigned the hero in Frye's account of the romance paradigm (which in this respect is very similar to that proposed by Propp for the fairy tale). In most romances, no doubt, the hero is called upon to struggle with the villain or demon; yet the account of Propp reminds us that he is able to do so only after elaborate preparation, and in particular with the help of various benign and preternatural agencies. In fact, a casual glance at the traditional heroes of romance, from Yvain and Parzifal to Fabrice and the Pierrot of Queneau or the "grand Meaulnes," suggests that the hero's dominant trait is naiveté or inexperience, and that his most characteristic posture is that of bewilderment. Surely, far from being an emissary of the "upper world," the hero of romance is something closer to an observer, a mortal spectator surprised by supernatural conflict, who then himself is gradually drawn in, to reap the rewards of victory without even quite being aware of what was at stake in the first place.

It will of course rightly be observed that Frye's description applies, not to romance as such, but to the myth of which it is itself a degraded form. However, the basic issue involved is not so much the relative elevation of the hero (Frye's own distinctions are well known: "superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment," "superior in degree," "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment,"[4] etc.), but rather the relevance of the very concept of the hero as a critical category What Frye ascribes to the character of the "mythical Messiah or deliverer" is indeed what Propp calls a series of functions, or what we may more loosely call a series of *deeds*: the hero is he who by his own action struggles and earns his victory or suffers his defeat, whose own feats are responsible for the regeneration and transfiguration of the fallen world, when that proves possible. I would argue that such a description is appropriate only for a narrative in which action as such is the predominant category of the event, whereas what we find in romance is something quite different, a sequence of events which are closer to states of being than to acts, or better still, in which even human acts and deeds are apprehended in relatively static, pictorial, contemplative fashion, as being themselves results and attributes, rather than causes in their own right. To put it another way, we might suggest that the very category of the "hero" as such belongs more properly to a dramatic literature, and that we therefore need to mark the contemplative nature of romance as narrative by the choice of some other term for the human figuration of which its pattern is in part woven. We will return to this problem later, for it becomes theoretically more urgent when we try to grasp romance as a fixed form.

For the present, we may now turn to the nature of the "states of being" of which the hero of romance is both a vehicle and a registering apparatus, for these go to the very heart of what is distinctive about romance as a mode. At this stage, what we would want to observe about Frye's account is that it fails to come to grips with the conceptual categories which inform and preselect the attributes and qualities by which those states are charac-

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terized. I would suggest that the most important of those organizational categories is the conceptual opposition between good and evil, under which all the other types of attributes and images (light and darkness, high and low, etc.) are clearly subsumed. Now it will be said that such an opposition, which is the basis of all ethics, is present in every conceivable literary form at every moment in human history and may thus be thought to have its roots deep in the nature of man; yet to think so would be to take this particular conceptual category at face value and on its own terms, rather than to attempt to "estrange" it in such a way as to view it as an anthropological phenomenon in its own right, an ideological formation as little natural, as historical and as humanly "constructed," as are, say, the totemic systems of certain primitive tribes, or that animism which forms a classical stage in the development of religion.

Thus seen, it becomes clear that while belief in good and evil is a very old form of thought which has spanned most of what Marx called man's "prehistory" (i.e., the vicissitudes of the human race up to the moment in which, in socialism, it begins to exercise mastery over its own fate), it is by no means without an intimate link to the social structure, in which such a belief fulfills a crucial function. In the shrinking world of today, indeed, with its gradual leveling of class and national and racial differences, it is becoming increasingly clear that the concept of evil is at one with the category of Otherness itself: evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that difference seems to constitute a very real and urgent threat to my existence. So from earliest times, the stranger from another tribe, the "barbarian" who speaks an incomprehensible language and follows "outlandish" customs, or, in our own day, the avenger of cumulated resentments from some oppressed class, or else that alien being—Jew or Communist—behind whose apparently human features an intelligence of a malignant and preternatural superiority is thought to lurk—these are some of the figures in which the fundamental identity of the representative of Evil and the Other are visible. The point, however, is not that in such figures the Other is feared because he is evil; rather, he is evil *because* he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar.[5]

Any analysis of romance as a mode will then want to come to terms with the intimate and constitutive relationship between the form itself, as a genre and a literary institution, and this deep-rooted ideology which has only too clearly the function of drawing the boundaries of a given social order and providing a powerful internal deterrent against deviancy or subversion.

As for the notion that the concept of good and evil is far more widespread in its literary use than this, and that it can therefore scarcely serve as a distinguishing characteristic of romance as a form, it is worth observing the absence of this particular opposition from tragedy, in which the triumph of an inhuman fate or destiny is felt to be something that radically transcends the mere human categories of good and evil. The proof is that

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when we do encounter, in something that looks like a tragedy, judgments that come from the ethical realm (as when we see this or that character as a villain), we generally describe such works as melodrama, and, indeed, the latter may in that respect rather be considered a degraded form of romance. As for comedy, we will see a little later that its categories are also quite distinct from those of romance, being in particular far more social in application: thus the classical conflict in comedy is not that between good and evil, but rather between youth and age, while the oedipal resolution of comedy aims, not at the restoration of a fallen world, but rather at the regeneration of the social order.

It may, however, also be objected that there are other semantic codes in the romance which are equally as important as that of good and evil; in particular, it would seem that the role of magic as such is considerable, if not indeed constitutive. Yet the belief in good and evil is precisely a magical thought mode, that is, one which springs from a precapitalist, essentially agricultural way of life. It is difficult to imagine a conflict of magical forces which would not be marked in some way as positive and negative, or in other words, ultimately, as a struggle between good and evil, between white magic and black magic. Thus the two systems, that of good and evil, and that of magic, are inextricably intermingled, and may indeed prove simply to be different dimensions of the same ideological phenomenon, that of Otherness directing our attention to the political and social attributes of such a world view, while the formulation in terms of magic rather orients us towards the economic organization of the society in question and the relations it entertains with the world of nature.

A final observation must come to terms with the very notion of *world* itself as it has been presupposed in the preceding remarks. It is a term now used relatively loosely, and without much awareness of its origins in the phenomenological movement and its status there as a relatively technical philosophical concept. Unlike Humpty Dumpty, however, we cannot impose a single, binding use on such a term, and it seems better to recognize that it has, as it were, both an esoteric—or technical—and an exoteric—or more popular—meaning. The latter conveys a relatively physical and geographical sense of landscape or nature; *world* here means "realm," even when it is associated with the presumably more disembodied powers of good and evil, and the exoteric use of the term never completely severs its connections with sense perception, even when it has become relatively figurative.

In its technical acceptation, however, *world* originally designated something like the frame or the *Gestalt,* the overall organizational category within which the various empirical innerworldly phenomena are perceived and the various innerworldly experiences take place. In this sense, then, a *world* cannot, as in the preceding use, be itself the object of experience or perception, for it is rather that supreme category which permits all experience or perception in the first place and must thus lie outside them as their own first condition.[6] Thus, there would seem to be, from

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the point of view of practical literary analysis, a very basic incompatibility between these two uses of the term, for in the first, the *world* or *worlds* of a given romance are understood as phenomena *within* the narrative, as objects of representation; while for the second, more technically philosophical perspective, the notion of "world" may serve as the framework for a description of the distinctive features of this or that world structure, but could not then itself figure within that description as one of the latter's components. The solution to the dilemma lies, I think, in the following hypothesis, namely, that, if we may be permitted the cumbersome Heideggerian formula, romance is that form in which the *world-ness* of *world* reveals itself. For romance, then, *both* uses of the term are appropriate, for romance as a literary form is that event in which *world* in the technical sense of the transcendental horizon of my experience becomes precisely visible as something like an innerworldly object in its own right, taking on the shape of *world* in the popular sense of nature, landscape, and so forth. And in its turn, the precondition of such a revelation is itself historical in character: for there must, as in medieval times, be something like a nature left as a mysterious and alien border around the still precarious and minute human activities of village and field, for the structure of world-ness to find an adequate vehicle through which it can manifest its existence. So Frye is surely not wrong to evoke the intimate connection between romance as a mode, and the "natural" imagery of earthly paradise or waste land, of the bower of bliss or the enchanted wood; what is misleading is that he should suggest that this "nature" is in any way itself a "natural" phenomenon.

III

With this correction of Frye's account, we are for the first time in a position to show what is interesting and useful about such an approach, namely, that it makes a genuinely *historical* account of romance possible. For when we speak of a mode, what can we mean but that this particular type of literary discourse is not bound to the conventions of a given age, nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal artifact, but rather persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed? The persistence of romance as a mode raises the very precise historical question of what, under wholly altered historical circumstances, can have been found to *replace* the constitutive raw materials of magic and otherness which medieval romance found ready to hand in its socioeconomic environment. A history of romance as a mode becomes possible, in other words, when we project it as a history of the various codes which, in the increasingly secularized and rational world that emerges from the collapse of feudalism, are called upon to assume the literary function of those older codes which

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have now become so many dead languages. Or, to put it the other way round, the fate of romance as a form is dependent on the availability of elements more acceptable to the reader than those older magical categories for which some adequate substitute must be invented.

An instructive example of this process of secularization and renewal may be observed in one of the earliest and monumental reinventions of the genre, Manzoni's *Promessi sposi,* surely, along with Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, one of the few persuasive postrevolutionary attempts to frame a genuinely religious narrative. In our present context, we are able to perceive that Manzoni's sophisticated theology—a post-Jansenist preoccupation with the states of sin and grace, a post-Calvinist preoccupation with Providence—functions precisely as a replacement of the older medieval structure of the magical world and marks the beginning secularization of romance as a form, a process whereby supernatural powers are supplanted by the more psychological "miracle" of conversion.

The plot of *I Promessi sposi* dramatizes a conflict of ever-widening proportions between forces of good and evil still closely linked to older animistic notions of white and black magic, and conceived as powers which radiate outwards from the affected characters. Here one does more than suffer evil, one is contaminated by it: thus, on learning of Don Rodrigo's plot to stop his marriage, Renzo is possessed by "a mad longing to do something strange and awful," on which Manzoni comments as follows: "Those who provoke or oppress, all those who do any wrong to others, are guilty not only of the harm they do, but also of the twists they cause in the minds of those they have injured. Renzo was a peaceable young man and averse to bloodshed—an open youth who hated deceit of any kind; but at that moment his heart only beat to kill, and his mind turned only on thoughts of treachery. He would have liked to rush to Don Rodrigo's house, seize him by the throat, and. . . ."[7] The passage is important, not because it gives us Manzoni's personal opinion on the subject, but because it blocks out a *world* of a determinate and peculiar structure, in which moral essences exercise a power which greatly transcends their own immediate local manifestations, a world in which something we may call *character-emanation* becomes an event within, or a causal convention of, such narrative in much the same way that action by distance, voodoo or curse, is an accepted part of the oral tales of primitive peoples. In such a world, then, we are prepared for the baleful spell exuded by the Gothic fortress of l'Innominato, which broods over the landscape like the very promise of evil; prepared also to witness and to believe in the appeasing power of Archbishop Federigo as he moves through an anarchic and plague-ridden countryside touched by the grace that radiates from his presence. In such a world the climactic event is that of *conversion*, and it is the internal struggle for the soul which, still conceived of in relatively external terms, serves as the substitute for the old *agon* of chivalric romance at this particular stage in the secularization of the form.

The conceptual form taken by magic in Manzoni's work may then be

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be characterized as miscegenation. While this situation lasts, the sexual disguises are there to distract us from it, and when at the end, the latter are unmasked, at one and the same time the former situation changes as well, and we find, to our class relief, that the girl in question, far from being a noblewoman, is none other than the porter's niece! So generic affiliations, and the systematic deviation from them, provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a protopolitical response to a historical dilemma.

VII

It remains to suggest the relationship between the generic approach we have outlined here and history itself, for a famous passage from *The German Ideology* warns us that the progression of forms with which we have been dealing must not be mistaken for anything like a genuine historical event: "We do not set out," Marx and Engels tell us,

> from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor even from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but it is rather men who, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.[19]

I have tried to show elsewhere that such ideal constructs earn their reality by the operation of historical *regrounding,* and it is through such an operation that any consequent genre criticism must be completed.[20] Genre criticism may thus be seen as a process which involves the use of three variable terms: the individual work itself, the intertextual sequence into which it is inserted through the ideal construction of a progression of forms (and of the systems that obtain between those forms), and finally that series of concrete historical situations within which the individual works were realized, and which thus stands as something like a parallel sequence to the purely formal one. This third series is of course the realm of concrete or infrastructural history in the sense of Marx and Engels.

The relationship between these three variables may now be formulated in terms of a permutational scheme, or what recent French theorists have called a *combinatoire*: a set of parallel series articulated into complexes of features or factors such that a variation in one results in a shift or transformation in the other.[21] Such a *combinatoire* is hierarchical: that is, changes in the infrastructure always result in shifts in the superstructure, and not the other way round (at least in the realm

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of literary history; the notion of a *reciprocal* interaction between base and superstructure is derived from other more overtly ideological types of superstructural phenomena, e.g., political discourses, which do not enjoy the semiautonomy of the literary text).

It should be emphasized that this permutational model does not imply a return to the older mechanical notions of causality for a reason which may also be helpful in distinguishing the critical method proposed here from some of the cruder forms which so-called vulgar Marxism has taken in the past: for it is not here a question of the relationship of positivities to each other, but rather of establishing what are essentially *limiting situations*. The infrastructural series (development of social life, evolution of the mode of production in question, and so forth) does not *cause* the individual work which reflects it to come into being: such a work is the symbolic response of an individual consciousness to his historical circumstances, and as such, dependent on the vicissitudes of individual life, might just as well have remained unwritten. The "causal" action exerted by the concrete or historical series on the *combinatoire* is rather one of exclusion than of production: the historical moment blocks off a certain number of formal possibilities which had been available in earlier situations, all the while opening up certain determinate new ones which may or may not then come into being. To put it another way, the *combinatoire* aims at revealing, not the causes behind a given form, but rather the *conditions of possibility* of its existence.

Thus, in the case of romance, it would seem that this genre is dependent for its emergence on the availability of a code of good and evil which is formulated in a magical, rather than a purely ethical, sense. This code finds its expression in the vision of higher and lower realms in conflict, yet it does not seem inconsistent to suggest that it is itself dependent on a kind of historical coexistence within the social order itself between two distinct moments of socioeconomic development. Romance as a form thus expresses a transitional moment, yet one of a very special type: its contemporaries must feel their society torn between past and future in such a way that the alternatives are grasped as hostile but somehow unrelated worlds. The social antagonism involved is therefore quite distinct from the conflict of two groups or classes *within* a given social order, as in the case in recent times, say, between labor and capital; and the archaic character of the categories of romance (magic, good and evil, otherness) suggests that this genre expresses a nostalgia for a social order in the process of being undermined and destroyed by nascent capitalism, yet still for the moment coexisting side by side with the latter. So Shakespearean romance (like its echo in Eichendorff) opposes its phantasmagoria to the bustling commercial activity at work all around it; while the great art romances of the Romantic period are only too obviously symbolic attempts to come to terms with the triumph of the bourgeoisie and the new and unglamorous social forms developing out of the market system. In this context, then, a late variant like that of Alain-Fournier may be understood as a reaction to the stepped-up pace of social change

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in the French countryside at the end of the nineteenth century (laicization and the *loi Combes,* electrification, industrialization, etc.), while that of Julien Gracq only too clearly reflects the regressive position of a province like Brittany.

This final step in the generic operation—the crucial one in any Marxist literary criticism—calls for a basic qualification as to the nature of the infrastructural series with which the other, more properly literary or formal, series are to be correlated. We have grown accustomed to the view that interpretation or explanation is essentially a process of transcoding, in which the privileged conceptual order, or if you like, "truth" itself, may simply be seen as that ultimate code with which we agree to be content. And of course, as with Freudian doctrine, the various Marxist concepts of the social classes and the stages of production, constitute just such a code or organized conceptual system, being abstractions or simplified models designed to clarify the far more complex and multidimensional realities of social history (or of the psyche as the case may be).

But if this is all that is involved, it follows that some different code or specialized terminology might do just as well, or in other words, that in this perspective Marxism would be simply one more critical language or method among others, and a peculiarly anticlimactic one at that: for if the terms of the infrastructural series are simply a conceptual code and nothing more, then the whole process of Marxist interpretation becomes an allegorical reading of texts in which the various literary materials are simply "translated" into their infrastructural counterparts. But this is not the case, and the critical operation we have presented requires us to correlate literary phenomena, not with such conceptual abstractions, but rather *with the realities to which those abstractions correspond.* The parallel with psychoanalysis is instructive, for what is distinctive about both Marxism and Freudianism, what marks both as materialisms and sharply differentiates them from self-contained philosophical "systems" of the traditional kind, is that both presuppose some previous concrete experience of the objects—political or depth-psychological—designated by their respective terminology. Without some prior "personal knowledge," in other words, the reader of Freudian or Marxist analyses is in the position of a child who grasps the *Sinn* of adult conversations without sensing their *Bedeutung,* and, what is more important, without having the slightest suspicion he is missing anything in the process: for, clearly, idealism as a worldview would be untenable were not just such purely formal and "intrinsically literary" analyses capable of seeming self-sufficient in their own right. On the other hand, this shorthand status of the language of materialistic explanation, its deliberately secondary and referential character, accounts for the disappointment which even the well-disposed reader may feel when all of these elaborate formal analyses end up in a few perfunctory remarks about the class situation in a given period. It is this disappointment, I assume, which gives rise to the curious reproach of "reductionism" (as though all abstraction were not a process of reducing reality and making simplified models of it).

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This is not the place for a defense of Marxism as such, but rather for pointing out the privileged relationship between historical materialism and genre study. The first extended monument of genuinely Marxist literary criticism—the letters of Marx and Engels to Lasalle about the latter's verse tragedy, *Franz von Sickingen*—is in fact essentially generic in its approach;[22] while in our own time the most substantial corpus of Marxist literary analysis, that of Lukács, has been genre-oriented from beginning to end (seeming, indeed, to recapitulate some ideal trajectory from a Hegelian interrogation of genre, in *Sociology of the Modern Drama* and *The Theory of the Novel,* to an Aristotelian emphasis in the late two-volume *Aesthetik*).

I take it, indeed, as one of the moments of "high seriousness" in the history of recent Marxist thought that when the aged Lukács responded to the urgency of supporting Solzhenitsyn's denunciation of Stalinism, while at the same time coming to terms with the tendentious antisocialist and religious propaganda to which the latter lent his talent and the authority of his personal suffering, he did so by sitting down at his desk and writing a genre study, incidentally one of his finest. The strategic value of the generic *combinatoire* for Marxism lies precisely in its ability to coordinate the synchronic relationship between work and immediate historical situation and the equally indispensable diachronic perspective in which that situation itself is grasped as a moment of an ongoing infrastructural evolution: it is this diachronic dimension which then permits a qualitative evaluation of the form as well—by juxtaposing it with what had been possible at other, structurally different moments of social development.

Ultimately, the justification for such a final, "reductive" moment is that of the completeness of the critical operation, the nature of the literary work as a symbolic act not becoming visible until the frame is expanded to include the historical situation itself. Still, it may be admitted that some literary phenomena seem to demand such completion more immediately and insistently than others: such would seem, indeed, to be the case with the very origins of romance in medieval times, where, as the cultural expression of a dominant class, the form obviously has a very different symbolic resonance from that, regressive and nostalgic, which we have attributed to it in its later manifestations. We have already suggested the constitutive relationship between romance and something like a positional concept of evil, analogous to the function of shifters or pronouns in linguistics, where the person standing opposite me is marked as the villain, not by virtue of any particular characteristics of his own, but simply in function of his relationship to my own place. Yet such a positional notion of good and evil does not characterize romance alone, but also the *chanson de geste* from which romance emerged, as well as the American western with which both have so much in common. Indeed, such a category of thought is only too intimately related to that fragmented and anarchic world of the post-Carolingian period, in which a

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population terrorized by barbarian incursions increasingly withdrew into the shelter of local fortresses.

When, in the twelfth century, this kind of social isolation is overcome and the feudal nobility becomes aware of itself as a universal class, with a newly elaborated and codified ideology, there arises what can only be called a *contradiction* between the older positional notion of evil and this emergent class solidarity. Romance may then be understood as an imaginary "solution" to this contradiction, a symbolic answer to the question of how my enemy can be thought of as being *evil,* that is, as other than myself and marked by some absolute *difference,* when what is responsible for his being so characterized is simply the identity of his own conduct with mine, which—challenges, points of honor, tests of strength—he reflects as in a mirror image. In the romance, this conceptual dilemma is overcome by a dramatic passage from appearance to reality: the hostile knight, in armor, his identity unknown, exudes that insolence which marks a fundamental refusal of recognition and stamps him as the bearer of the category of evil, up to the moment in which, defeated and unmasked, he asks for mercy and *tells his name*: "Sire, Yidiers, li filz Nut, ai non" (*Erec et Enide,* 1042), at which point he becomes simply one knight among others and loses all his sinister unfamiliarity. This moment, in which the antagonist *ceases* to be a villain, is thus what distinguishes the use of the category of evil in romance from that to be found in the *chanson de geste* or the classical western: but it has other, more positive consequences for the development of the new form as well. For now that the experience of evil can no longer be invested in any definitive or permanent way in this or that human agent, it must be expelled from the world of purely human affairs in a kind of foreclosure and projectively reconstituted into something like a free-floating and disembodied realm in its own right, that baleful optical illusion which we henceforth know as the realm of sorcery or of magic, and which thus completes the requirements for the emergence of romance as a distinctive new genre. Yet as a literary device, this vision of a realm of magic superimposed on the earthly, purely social world, clearly outlives the particular historical and ideological contradiction which it was invented to resolve, thereby furnishing material for other quite different symbolic uses as the form itself is adapted to the varying historical situations described above.

So the persistence of romance poses problems even graver than those suggested to Marx by the "normal childhood" of Greek art: [23] for this crueler and more superstitious adolescence, and the archaic nostalgia with which it becomes associated (consider, for example, the implications of the revival of medieval romance by English neo-Catholicism, in particular by Tolkien and C. S. Lewis) raises something like an aesthetic counterpart to the problem of ideology. Such an interrogation—of the ideological nature of *form*—can alone rescue literary study from its trivialization at the hands of antiquarian and aesthete, can alone restore

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to literature itself its gravity as a mode of organizing experience and thereby a social and political act in its own right.

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NOTES

1 "La Structure et la Forme," *Cahiers de l'Institut de Science Economique Appliquée*, No. 99 (Mar. 1960), 3-36.

2 *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 193; my italics.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 187-88.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

5 See J.-P. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Saint Genêt*.

6 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, 1957), pp. 63-66.

7 *I Promessi Sposi*, Ch. 2 (or, *The Betrothed*, tr. Archibald Colquhoun [New York, 1968], p. 25).

8 *Le Rouge et le noir*, Book I, Ch. 6 (or, *The Red and the Black*, tr. Robert M. Adams [New York, 1969], p. 24).

9 *La Chartreuse de Parme*, Ch. 8: "Thoughts of ambition and advantage had quite withered that delicate plant we call happiness."

10 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Andreas*, in *Erzählungen* (Tübingen, 1945), p. 176; or *Selected Prose*, tr. Mary Hottinger and Tania and James Stern (New York, 1952), p. 59; translation modified.

11 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 131-40.

12 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin, 1968), pp. 21-23.

13 A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale* (Paris, 1966), pp. 172-91.

14 Boris Eichenbaum, *O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1968), p. 4.

15 Roland Barthes, "Par où commencer?" *Poétique*, 1 (1970), 4: "first establish the two ensemble-termini, the opening and closing *tableaux*, then explore the various paths, the various transformations and strategic operations whereby the latter is linked to or differentiated from the former: it is necessary in other words to define the transition from one state of equilibrium to another, thereby passing through the black box." See, for an analogous reading of the novel, but in terms of *écriture*, Frank Kermode, "A Modern Way with the Classic," *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 415-34; and for a Marxist approach, Terry Eagleton, *Images of Power* (London, 1975).

16 See my *Prison-House of Language* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 13-19, and Claudio Guillén, "Literature as System," *Literature as System* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 375-419. Two quite different, but equally poststructural, models of genre study may be found in Hans Robert Jauss, "Litterature médiévale et théorie des genres," *Poétique*, 1 (1970), 79-101; and Michael Riffaterre, "Système d'un genre descriptif," *Poétique*, 3 (1972), 15-30. A convenient survey of other recent theories is offered by Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre* (Ithaca, 1972).

17 Claudio Guillén, "Satira y Poetica en Garcilaso," *Homenaje a Casalduero* (Madrid, 1972), pp. 209-33.

18 Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 173.

19 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York, 1972), p. 47.

20 *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 375-400.

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21 Two suggestive and very different constructions of such a model may be found in Charles Mauron, *Psychocritique du genre comique* (Paris, 1964) and Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris, 1970).

22 See Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art*, ed. Stefan Morawski and Lee Baxandall (New York, 1974), pp. 106-12, 143-44; or, for the complete correspondence (including Lasalle's replies), Marx and Engels, *Über Kunst und Literatur* (Berlin, 1953), pp. 129-67.

23 "The difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model," etc. Karl Marx, 1857 Introduction, *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (New York, 1970), p. 217.

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