Beyond essence (or, getting over ‘there’): Cognitive and dialectical theories of genre

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Post-essentialism

Genre theories frequently err by shortchanging the full range of genre processes. Focusing on only one stage or context — tradition, author, text or reception — can hide a whole world of genre-relevant facts. A more adequate analysis should consider at least the following factors in the prototypical sequence leading to a new genre member: There is a collection of past works constituting a genre; a writer reads some of those works, and then models a new work after them; a work with some of the genre’s defining features results from this creation; and some readers of the work recognize its relation to its models and its generic intention. The present drive to supersede ‘essentialist’ theories of genre might dovetail with a remedy to this problem. But the available versions of dialectical genre theory — favored candidate for a post-essentialist view — use a method of analysis that unifies the often fractious aspects of genre in a way that fails to respect their differences.

Deborah Madsen writes, ‘There appears to be a new consensus emerging in genre theory. [. . .] No longer is it thought to reside with the author as an intention, nor is genre considered to be an effect manifest by the reader, least of all is genre treated as a stable core of meaning inherent in the text. The assumption of “essence” or generic identity, upon which taxonomy relies, is now read as an open invitation to deconstruction’ (1994: 7). She later concludes, ‘Genre theory in the wake of poststructuralism must take the form of a post-essentialist theory. This is only possible if genre is located, not in the text, nor in an abstract definition, but in the discourse that relates text to theory’ (1994: 18). This zone of consensus is better labeled post-Jamesonian, given its use of historicizing critiques of essentialism to fulfill Jameson’s project of a ‘dialectical genre theory’. Adena Rosmarin, John Snyder, and Deborah Madsen, in their different ways, all wish to pursue Jameson’s aim of taking genre study to a new meta-level, which will attend to its own structure and purposes. A
reflexive analysis of genre categories can, I agree, clear up the relations among genre, writer, text, and reader. But I propose a cognitivist turn to escape an impasse to which the dialectical route leads. I contend that the issue of essences does not concern where genre is ‘located’ so much as whether (and how) genre might be said to be in several places rather than one (even ‘the discourse that relates text to theory’ is one place). The Jamesonian critics, I believe, founder on the need to have it both ways: to see genre first as mediating history in literature, and then as a form of the critic’s making, to be transcended dialectically. That is, the ‘post-essentialist’ impetus is to see genre as ‘in discourse’ rather than in the text or writer; but in order for their ideological critique to be historically meaningful, critics must attribute some real effective existence to the genre as it exists in writer and text (a genre that is only the product of the latter-day critic’s discourse cannot mediate history in the works of the past). To allow enough stability to a genre to allow it to mediate history, however, the critic must return to some essentialist view of genre. I will elaborate on this criticism after sketching the foundations of an alternative approach to genre.

Critics have recognized the value of a ‘prototype theory’ of categorization for understanding the structures of genres and their taxonomies. A cognitive approach allows us to locate genre in all of its usual haunts. The way to link writer’s and reader’s genres accurately and without contradiction is to see the text as really embodying writer’s and reader’s cognitive models, and to see those models as sometimes ‘the same’ in that, diverse and variable though they may be, they can also be significantly isomorphic.

Cluster models for genre membership

George Lakoff’s account of categories as elements of ‘cognitive models’ that structure thought offers an elegant way of doing justice to how these multiple factors shape our judgments. His monumental Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things synthesizes scholarship on human categorization and advances a general theory of human conceptual structure. To condense it into a sentence, it starts with the facts that people learn categories from examples and judge things to be more or less representative of the category by judging similarity to a prototype; it then explains such ‘prototype effects’ as resulting from the conflict of our ‘idealized cognitive models’ (ICMs) with our experience. The most complex kind of categories are ‘radial’. Underlying each is a ‘cluster model’, a set of separable models, each of which defines the category by a certain criterion, but which, taken
together, are psychologically more basic and converge on a central sub- 
category. For example, the classical theory assumes clear necessary and 
sufficient conditions defining mother in all situations: something like ‘a 
woman who has given birth’. But no definition can cover all cases. Mother 
is a concept based on a combination of models including the birth model, 
the genetic model, the nurturance model, and the marital model, which 
respectively define the mother as: the person who gives birth, the female 
who contributes the genetic material, the female adult who nurtures and 
raises a child, and the wife of the father. The central subcategory contains 
the cases where the same person is identified by all of the various models: 
the woman who provides the egg, bears the child, raises the child, and 
is the father’s wife (1987: 74–76, 83–84).2 

The category genre seems to be at least as complicated as that of 
mother. Paul Hernadi’s divisions of genre theories were an early attempt 
to transcend the deadlock of essentialism and move ‘beyond genre’ (1972). 
We can use them, then, as a guide for models of genre membership:

- **Writer-Based or Expressive models** focus on the author’s intention, 
  and study the author’s plans and sources. This includes the model of 
  the author imitating certain exemplars and the model of the author 
  following certain rules.

- **Work and World-Based, or Structural and Mimetic models** focus on the 
  similarity of the work to genre members, and study intrinsic form and 
  theme. This includes the model of the work bearing features charac-
  teristic of a certain genre and the model of the work embodying a 
  certain vision of the world.

- **Reader-Based or Pragmatic models** focus on the shared knowledge in 
  the discourse community of the genre and its features, and study what 
  generic concepts were in the air, what labels applied, etc. This in-
  cludes the ‘contract model’ of the audience recognizing conventions 
  used in the work and the ‘subjectivist’ model of the audience deter-
  mining genre according to its own lights and interests.

In brief, when all models identify the same genre, we have a case of 
central genre membership.3 Prototype effects arise when they differ. An 
example of a central case is Henry James, whose books develop from 
novel exemplars and theories about the novel, have many familiar novel-
istic features, and have always been recognized as novels. An example of 
a non-central case is Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*. That book imitates Cer-
vantes’ manner, is intended as a ‘comic epic-poem in prose’, and has a 
‘comic’ vision and other features of drama, but is now firmly understood 
as a novel. Like the concept of mother, this genre seems intuitively clear 
when all conditions obtain. This makes it, like mother, a gestalt concept:
'It is one of the principal findings of prototype theory that certain clusters of conditions are more basic than individual conditions in the cluster. [...] Such a gestalt is often representable by an ICM. It should be borne in mind that in such cases the entire ICM is understood as being psychologically simpler than its parts [...]’ (Lakoff 1987: 489–490). Because of the plurality of criterial conditions, prototype effects are rampant in genre phenomena. Lakoff’s theory neatly explains them while mounting a powerful critique of classical objectivist and essentialist category theory. This framework shows great promise to genuinely surpass both essentialist and extreme-relativist assumptions.

**Dialetical theories of genre**

The critical emphasis on the reader and critic side of the equation, following the general drift of theoretical focus from author through work and text, opens the way to the dialectical critique of genre. From seeing genre as a form of discourse, employed by the writer to shape a world, we can look to the later destiny of that discourse, and see genre as the conventions or expectations the audience uses to understand it and then as a theory employed by the critic to interpret it. The next step is the dialectical one of leaving the literary field as such to make our thought about genre the object of reflection.

Fredric Jameson, the pioneer of dialectical genre study, sees genre-defining ‘ideologemes’ as historically determined ethical views, and examines how particular local deviations from abstract generic norms mediate changing historical conditions. I believe he equivocates in analyzing writer’s genre and reader’s genre as the same but different: He assumes the structure that he describes is really in the text, but wants also to see it as in the reader’s mind, revealed by the critic, to be dialectically transcended. He keeps his theory consistent, at the cost of descriptive oversimplification, by making the writer’s and reader’s genres consistent.

Three other critics inherit the equivocation and try to finesse it in different ways. Each tries an approach highlighting parts of the genre process, and their strategies, developing diachronically, also serendipitously follow a dialectical completion pattern. To put the comparisons briefly, Rosmarin like Jameson sees the schematic aspect of genre, but makes the critic the user of the schema’s power to explain and elevate the text. At the far extreme, Snyder rejects the schema aspect and like Jameson makes the writer the conduit of the genre’s power to make incursions of discourse into history. Madsen tries to bridge the two extremes, genre as deductive theory and genre as exercise of power, by making genre a strategy in the
discourse’s claim to truth, ‘a way of discussing texts both within the text itself and within the critical community’ (1994: 14). To put the corresponding problems briefly, Rosmarin transcends historical genre by simply leaving the writer’s generic thought behind. Because Snyder leaves structure behind by seeing genres as histories of instances of discursive power-use, he conflates individual and collective, literary and political power. And Madsen falls between them, artificially yoking together writer’s and reader’s genres under the speciously unifying rubric of ‘discourse’. These are not the only possible ways to develop Jameson’s ideas, but they represent major paths (two opposing views and a synthesis) toward the same goal of a non-essentialist dialectical theory of genre. After surveying these developments, we will return to the roots of their difficulties in Jameson’s dialectics of genre.

Rosmarin

Adena Rosmarin insists that genre is in the critic, a deductive schema used to unfold the text in a syllogistic fashion. Genres do not represent reality; they are not in the text; and they are not in the reader unless the reader is also a critic. They are in the writer in some sense, but any correspondence of the writer’s genre with the critic’s is coincidental and unimportant. She rejects the traditional treatment of genre ‘not as the critic’s explanatory tool but as a hypothesis, a probable stab at the truth, something whose inherence in a [...] text or whose independent existence as a schema is potentially verifiable or, at least refutable’ (1985: 25–26). Against a traditional distinction between ‘heuristic’ and ‘constitutive’ views of genre, she argues that the heuristic is constitutive because all genre is created by critics in a pragmatic-rhetorical deductive process. She adopts Vaihinger’s ‘philosophy of “as if”’, which sees knowledge as defined by internal consistency in a system, related only in the most indirect way to correspondence with ‘reality’: ‘what we call truth . . . is merely the most expedient error’ (quoted. in Rosmarin 1985: 20). The highest value for Rosmarin is reason: A genre idea is like a sorites, and a genre attribution is ‘true’ if its consistency (with the text and with itself) and productivity equals or exceeds other genre attributions.

This relentlessly deductive approach is at least imprudent. It begins with the resolution of what she sees as Gombrich’s problem of getting a schema to ‘match’ or ‘fit’ what it represents. In her account, facts are eliminated and form matches only function. But if there were no contribution from the facts, then the first fit of a theory to an explanatory function could never be improved upon. Schemas do not absolutely de-
termine all facts. An acknowledgement of our capacity to use multiple schemas and a nuanced distinction between perception and conception can settle this. There are schemas and schemas, and there are facts and facts. Some facts are more conceptual, some more perceptual.

Therefore, her constructivism goes too far. Her scorn for any attempt at induction turns into an indifference to historical kinds and their uses. It leaves us in the counterintuitive position of putting historical kinds on a level with any theoretical kinds by making the reality of all depend solely on their expediency for the critic’s explanatory purpose: ‘We value the explanation that […] can make sense both in the explanation’s own terms, meaning that it is closely and consistently reasoned, and in terms of its topic, meaning that it unfolds the literary text’s value as a literary text’ (1985: 39–40). The last phrase jars with her deductive evaporation of facts: Absent a schema or theory for literary value, how are we to know what the criterion of the value of a literary text is? The next sentence gives the game away, revealing the circularity and the latent bias in her return to evaluation: ‘And we value most highly the genre that helps us to make such explanations’ (1985: 40). But if we grant that the writer as well as the reader-critic uses schemas — and this is part of Gombrich’s point, surely — then the contradiction between heuristic and constitutive, and the need to assimilate one to the other, dissolve.

Rosmarin affiliates herself with Jameson’s vision of the final turn of the dialectic:

the ‘final moment of the generic operation, in which the working categories of genre are themselves historically deconstructed and abandoned, suggests a final axiom, according to which all generic categories, even the most time-hallowed and traditional, are ultimately to be understood (or “estranged”) as mere ad hoc, experimental constructs, devised for a specific textual occasion and abandoned like so much scaffolding when the analysis has done its work’ (p. 145). This ‘final axiom’ is, in effect, my beginning premise. (1985: 174, n52)

She sees herself as fulfilling Jameson’s project by treating all genres as disposable filters, used for a specific top-down purpose and cast away. But on closer inspection, Jameson’s axiom is ambiguous: Are we to consider genres as our constructs or the writer’s? The overall tenor of the passage, describing historical deconstruction and abandonment ‘when the analysis has done its work’ suggests that the genres are ours, the analysts’. But the depth of ambiguity appears if we ask of these time-hallowed categories who devises them for those textual occasions, and who deconstructs them. Are they the same person? It seems not. If we try to resolve the ambiguity by treating genres as the author’s constructs that we de-
construct and abandon (yet are not inherent in the text), we then arrive at Rosmarin’s contradiction, that the genre of a particular work can be both used for a specific occasion by its real author, and created or used deductively by critics.

It is implied that either there are two equally real genres, or any correspondence between the author’s genre and our own is purely coincidental, as the comment on critic’s versus author’s intentions, far-fetched beneath its veneer of reasonableness, attests:

It is not necessary to deny — nor am I doing so — that the poet or novelist knew his genre in order to accept that our narrations of his generic manipulation are nevertheless informed by our present-tense explanatory purpose. Nor should the occasional coincidence of a critical genre with a genre similarly named in history confuse the issue by leading us either to naturalize or to hypostatize that genre, concealing thereby its definitional nature and the deductively unfolded knowledge that it enables. (1985: 37, my emphasis)

Clearly, we cannot deconstruct and abandon a generic idea existing in the past mind of a presently dead author. We can only deconstruct our generic idea. But once we fulfill the goal of a dialectical genre theory in Rosmarin’s way, then all genres come as it were pre-deconstructed. A genre is a critic’s schema, and any schema is as good as another, provided it issues in explanatory power and ‘literary value’ — excluding, of course, any concern about the author’s influences, ideas, and intentions, and their development and gradual realization in the work. That, presumably, is not something that needs explaining.5

Snyder

Snyder too is moved by a post-essentialist spirit. But he complains that ‘Rosmarin’s and others’ representational conceptions of genre as deductive yet pragmatically rhetorical classification are attended by a shadowy sense of history as previous similarity and dissimilarity’ — as if it were all in the past. This robs history of its reality to fabricate an ‘everlasting present’ (1991: 203–204). On the other side of the dialectical question, he wants to relate genre not to self-consciousness about categories, but to political history per se. But he never escapes its pull toward literary history and meaning. The ambiguity of ‘history’ and ‘politics’ that will harry his project is there on the first page of the preface: He has reformulated genre ‘as the historical construction of texts by the texts themselves. Tragedy is not what has been called “tragedy.”’ Tragedy is what tragedies
have done toward the political ends of victory, loss, and stalemate’ (1991: ix). Construction of texts by texts is a big step away from action toward political ends in any usual sense. He also wants to bypass ‘mediation’ in the usual sense to make genres ‘violent incursions’ of texts into history. These incursions cash out as abstract thematic messages whose ideological status and effect on nonliterary history is doubtful. He describes his three genres as distinctive prospects of power, beginning with the essay: ‘This is the power of voicing a politics of free self-definition and a subversive critique of ideology. Similarly, I see in tragedy the genre most efficient in working out the power politics of win, loss, or stalemate, whether in its traditional form of nationalism or its modern forms of social, ethnic, and racial revolutionism. And satire […] will continue to be a favorite weapon, albeit two-edged, of rationalist critique and a promising though problematic prospect of clarified values’ (1991: 206). It is curious, first, how rarely this kind of explanation appears, although it should be the crux of his argument. Then we must question its accuracy. These features seem plausible in a general way but tangential to their genres: Could they not have other power inflections? These historical interventions are more conceptual than political: They may potentially lead to action, but the relevant action-terms here are ‘voicing’, ‘working out’, ‘critique’, and ‘clarification’ — ethereal fare for a historical materialist. We know little more about what tragedy has done politically, because Snyder does not tell us. Histories and ideologies are gestured at rather than analyzed, and when his readings are not entirely aesthetic-literary, they are cryptic: ‘History is Aeschylus’s Persians; or, later, with Buchner’s Danton’s Death, tragedy is history: not the deeds at Salamis and Paris, but their status as imitative actions, as activations of Athenian identity and modern bourgeois liberty. […] As ground of experience and experience, as determining and being determined, history and texts possess power together. This is power in the mode of violence — not momentum and not continuity’ (1991: 207). By this sophistry, if historical actions are imitations of literary themes, then texts, as manifestations of literary themes, are nearly historical actions. But I doubt historians would endorse these accounts of actions. Philosophically, if someone writes a tragedy and no one sees it, is it still a tragedy? The answer is yes, if tragedy is the construction of a text by other texts, but no, if it is a political force toward a political outcome.

Snyder’s tripartite equation genre-as-discourse-as-power sees genre shaping and being shaped by historical reality. His attempts to explain this are murky, but seem to claim that each genre has its own discourse formation, which fits its own kind of social purposiveness: The formation of mimesis of action in tragedy enacts celebration or mourning; the rhet-
oric in satire enacts rational critique; and textuality in the essay enacts self-liberation. These discourse formations are ‘material causes’, so ‘formation’ is the construction of texts. One crucial point is that he sees the rhetoric of mimesis of action in tragedy as the primary discourse formation, so the rhetoric, and hence the social purposes, of the other genres (satire’s rationality and essay’s free play) are derivative. Tragedy’s purpose is to enact the outcomes of action — win, loss, or draw — and rational critique and self-liberation are displacements or abstractions of these outcomes. As a result, satire never wins and the essay never loses.

Turning to particular works, his ideas seem not to apply well. ‘The possibilities of tragedy are victory, defeat, or draw, but no real synthesis abrogating or transcending the inherently agonistic nature of the struggle’ (1991: 30). Of course, The Iliad mourns losses as well as celebrates victories, and also contains a deadlock caused by Achilles’ withdrawal. Though the agon remains, can this be aimed at one outcome? It seems rather to put into play all three outcomes and our complex reactions to them. Snyder discusses theme, focus, and length of action as reasons for the distinction of tragedy from epic: ‘The Iliad is an epic because it does not fasten on the formation of new identity through war. The Persians, however, is a tragedy precisely because it dwells on the horror of the defeated as a perfect reflection of the joy of the victor. […] over the long term Homeric [epic] objectivity toward war prevails; the short term belongs to tragedy’s framing of immediate pathos’ (1991: 33–35). The distinction between central dramatic tragedy and non-central ‘tragic modes’ seems to me an important one. But then it is strange to think of the epic, the ‘progenitor genre’ of tragedy as a watered-down (long term, objective) form of it (1991: 92). The further singling out of Aeschylus’s work from that of Sophocles and Euripides to define tragedy seems arbitrary, and the formulations of the genre consequently capricious [‘In the conventional, narrow sense of “political,” perhaps only Aeschylus would qualify as a political tragedian’ (1991: 74)]. Oedipus Rex also moves from Oedipus in the role of savior to a deadlock of partial and half-conscious knowledge to a horrible defeat. And only the background of this movement is political. Oedipus’ story is not short term, as it is the culmination of forces set in motion at his birth. It treats identities formed not through war but through the pain of trying to bear an unbearable personal, familial fate. Snyder’s whole analysis ultimately comes down to a quite arbitrary association of generic possibilities with the triad of win / loss / draw that is no more plausible than the other associational triads ably dispatched by Genette’s Architext (1992).

Snyder cites a key sentence from Jameson as a catalyst for his study: ‘The strategic value of generic concepts for Marxism clearly lies in the
mediatory function of the notion of a genre, which allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life’ (1981: 105; quoted in Snyder 1991: 7). Capping his analysis of tragedy as power, he returns to his Jamesonian mandate:

Power dispersal as the non-essence substance of the law of genre [...] can lay a bridge between literature and aesthetics on the one hand and cultural history on the other. The results [...] could [...] fulfill the scenario set by Fredric Jameson for a complete Marxist dialectics of culture. For genre, tragic genre above all, would be the required nonessentializing mediatory tool for understanding society’s own power configurations of victory, loss, and stalemate. (1991: 93)

His revised account of mediation is meant to fulfill Jameson’s dialectical goal, but in fact, his work illustrates the danger of any attempt to relate genre to history without a sound conception of mediation. Early ‘vulgar Marxists’ found crude ‘social equivalents’ as causes of literary forms. Snyder assigns crude discursive ‘generic equivalents’ as causes of and responses to history. Eschewing mediation, Rosmarin ends up with an idealist text-creating critic’s genre, and Snyder ends up with an idealist history-creating writer’s genre.

**Madsen**

Madsen introduces Jameson as a metadiscursive ally challenging the conservative normalizing potential of the conventions required for communicative codes: ‘[W]hile Jameson shares the view that genre functions as a form of communication, he proposes that the object of generic study should be the relationship between text and the generic categories used to analyze the text. This dialectical approach would reveal genre to be a form of communication that enables the critic to communicate a particular historically determined ethical view. Genre is thus divorced from any intrinsic textual site and is located in metatextual discursive operations’ (1994: 24). He proposes a ‘deconstruction of existing genre criticism [that] is the a posteriori version of Rosmarin’s pragmatics of genre’. Both have learned the ‘poststructuralist lesson’ that ‘genre theory can prevent the mystifications and typologizing abuses of conventional theory by making explicit the operations of genre criticism’ (1994: 24).

For Madsen, the discourse of genre has two aspects, writer’s and critic’s: ‘Genre is located not in an abstract set of textual characteristics but in discourse; genre is viewed as a rhetorical construction, a way of dis-
cussing texts both within the text itself and within the critical community’ (1994: 14). Critics must become self-conscious about what is ‘at stake’ in their genre-talk. This does not mean blindly working against the text’s truth claims (1994: 7). Rather, because these truth-claims are ‘the means by which the text presents itself as valuable’, her approach will ‘attend to the way in which the texts evaluate their own rhetorical components.[…] the ways in which a text manipulates encoded generic attitudes in order to produce a specific construction of “Truth”’ (1994: 14). The point that the text constructs itself as valuable signals Madsen’s distance from Rosmarin’s view that the critic constructs the text’s value. The focus on the text’s manipulations brings her close to Jameson, but also brings back the ambiguity problem: Genre-in-the-text as manipulation of encoded generic attitudes may run counter to genre-for-the-critic as a way of talking about that text.

For her narrative view of genre, she begins with Genette, for whom a genre is ‘a specification of content […] not prescribed by the definition of mode’ (1994: 24). (Madsen’s conception of modes, like irony, being defined by the effect of linguistic constructions differs from Genette’s view.) She then goes on to argue that modes are a minor aspect of texts, because the text is dominated by the ‘content’ settled by genre. But the formula that irony or romance is a marginalized aspect of a text that is ‘dominated’ by a generic content seems inadequate to capture the relation between mode and genre. Because the two do not contradict one another (the most specific content does not crowd out the most intense irony), why is it that Genette’s ‘content’ ‘must dominate the text and require that modal forms adapt to the semantic demands of genre’ (1994: 25)? The next step, however, arguing for the universality of multigenricity, depends on this dominant genre/marginalized mode claim. She observes that the function of encyclopedism changes in Bernard Silvestris’s allegory: No longer a list of definitions and descriptions, the catalogue of creation is a sacramental exploration of the allegory of the world as text (1994: 25). The implication is that the linguistic construction is encyclopedism, which is altered by its generic context, which is allegory. But it is not clear what mode is the effect of this construction of encyclopedism — is it exhaustiveness? Definition? Description? How does it adapt in this context? Does it become sacramental? We are not told. And is allegory the ‘content’ that is dominating the text? But ‘allegory’ does not specify content either: The content must be creation, or the idea of world-as-text. It is simpler to see ‘encyclopedism’ as a generic feature, whose function changes in different genres. The conclusion aimed at is that multigeneric ‘contamination’ of a supposedly pure narrative essence is the nature of all genres (1994: 25). A single observation of a change in genre causing a
construction to change its mode is a thin branch on which to hang this point. And the example is not of a multigenre text, but of a feature changing in mode as it migrates from one genre to another.6

At any rate, this leads to the Derridean dicta that all genres are mixed, and a text identifies itself (publicly) as monogeneric only by suppressing its (private) potential multigenre: ‘By choosing one generic designation, the text denies all of the other generic and modal traces that make the dominant generic mark, by contrast, remarkable’. Hence, at last, ‘A set of themes or semantic code, brought to bear upon a modal style of expression, appears to be the mechanism by which a generic narrative form is produced.[…] Taken together, style and content would produce the discourse in terms of which a generic mark is identified and the text’s generic practice declared’ (1994: 26).

But this is genre from the author / text-side. How does that turn into critical discourse? It seems that the public / private dichotomy underlies both the way the text ‘declares its practice’ and the way the reader grasps that declaration. The processes of explicit identification and public articulation make genre common to writer and critic (1994: 26). Because this progress from private ambiguous multiplicity to univocal public declaration is definitive of a genre, any slipping along the way, any variance between the writer’s genre and the reader’s genre, threatens the genre’s very existence. Given the equation of genre with a telos of the obvious, the preconceived, the suppression of possibilities, it is hard to see how works that stretch or mix genres could flourish, or even achieve existence. Rosmarin favors the critic’s schema and Snyder favors the writer’s history, and both produce partial views. Like Jameson, Madsen is more perspicuous in trying to include both. But the attempt to ‘locate genre’ in a complex discursive process rather than in author, reader, or text alone only produces a more complex essence with a conjunction of conditions rather than dismantling essence by locating genre in a plurality of categorial models. Madsen overcomes the equivocation problem insofar as she decrees that for a work to have a genre at all, writer’s and reader’s conceptions and textual ‘marks’ must agree. But the cost of this solution is that a generically ambiguous work has no genre at all. This accords with what the cognitive view calls central genre membership, but makes no provisions for non-centrality.

Jameson

Let us consider how the master himself reaches his seminal conclusions. Jameson’s initial distinction between ‘semantic’ and ‘syntactic’ trends in
genre theory strategically excludes other trends. Both fall under Hernadi’s Work and World-Based, or Structural and Mimetic models so the large classes of Writer-Based / Expressive and Reader-Based / Pragmatic models are ignored. His next simplifying move is to try to link the two remaining theories, by regarding them as dialectical counterparts.

The dual or multiple aspect view of genre diminishes the sense of ‘contradiction’ between aspects and so removes the impetus to dialectically spiral to a resolution on a higher plane of explanation. I think Jameson sensed this as anathema to the Marxist project of using genre theory to mediate the paired series of social history-cultural history. For unless the text speaks with one generic voice, conveys one ‘spirit’ or ‘world-view’, by one basic ‘deep structure’, it will be very difficult for Jameson to relate it meaningfully to its historical preconditions. We need a single definite genre to ascertain the deviation of the individual text from its deeper narrative structure. And taking the measure of this deviation is what ‘directs our attention to those determinate changes in the historical situation which block a full manifestation or replication of the structure on the discursive level’ (1981: 146).

After outlining the two trends, semantic / syntactic, phenomenological / structural, Frygean / Proppian, which study the meaning of a mode versus the working of a fixed form, Jameson insists that ‘the two approaches are thus no mere inversions of each other, but are fundamentally incommensurable’ (1981: 108). There are two reasons for this: First, each projects a distinct dialectical opposite or negation; second, the genre-theoretical antinomies can be traced to the dual nature of language as both subject and object or intentional meaning and articulated system. Thus he rejects the possibility of a dual aspect view because accepting such a ‘sterile’ and ‘disappointing’ hypothesis would condemn genre theory to a ‘methodological double standard’ (1981: 108–109).

There is not enough said about these reasons to argue much with them. The ‘dialectical negation’ reason is unsatisfying in the first place because concepts do not always have a single obvious opposite, and without a context, we can only go on intuition in deciding on one (the opposite of red is green in a traffic-lights context, black in a playing-cards context). Secondly, the opposites Jameson assigns are curious. For the semantic approach, the genre-defining contrary is always another mode; for the syntactic approach, the ‘opposite’ of comedy is that which is noncomic or unfunny. This is strange because being structurally comic and being funny do not necessarily co-occur (what about satire?). Because the subject is comedy rather than humor, the actual humor of a genre (if there is such a thing) seems irrelevant. I would expect that both views, because they both refer to genre, would simply project another genre, defined in
their own terms, as an opposite (presumably ‘semantic’ and ‘syntactic’ versions of tragedy).

The ‘double standard’ objection is not fully explained. The study of language, he says, to avoid premature reification of its object, ‘must henceforth take the mediatory path of the separate specialized disciplines which each of these perspectives […] has generated: logic and linguistics, semantics and grammar, phenomenology and semiotics’; and this condemns genre theory to a double standard (1981: 109). But if language can be dual-aspect, why not literature? There is no double standard in the sense of a hypocritical or contradictory method. Disciplinary partitioning is helpful, but so is exchange through and modification of partitions. Some linguists used formal logic to try to specify the grammatical logic of natural languages. Others reject a hallmark partition of Chomsky’s approach, the thesis of the ‘autonomy of syntax’ from semantics. This represents explanatory economy, not a double standard.

As the ostensible reasons for Jameson’s ‘incommensurability’ position are not convincing, we should consider other motivations for it. We surmise that, more than any logical necessity, the stance serves the goal of a Marxist critique of literature by way of a dialectical genre theory. That is, Marxist theory wants to see the two approaches, modal and structural, as objectively determined antinomies, and therefore as partial views, so that it can ‘de-positivize’ them, reveal their strategically repressed contradictions in order to restore them dialectically, by completing them in a different spirit (1981: 109–110). This brings us to a method of reading that indexes deviations from structural norms to degeneration from the modal norm of an ideal organic, pre-individualistic, magic-based culture into the objectifying substitute-values of capitalist culture. His working hypothesis is that the modal approach must be pursued to the next step, when, ‘by means of radical historicization, the “essence”, “spirit”, “world-view”, in question is revealed to be an ideologeme, that is, a historically determinate conceptual or semic complex which can project itself variously in the form of a “value system” or “philosophical concept”, or in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective fantasy’ (1981: 115). The ideologeme for romance is the ‘ethical binary’. The complement to the modal aspect of genres is a structural ‘fixed form’ aspect: Propp’s character functions combined with Greimassian ‘semic transformations’. These structural models feed into the poststructuralist critique of the subject because they ‘become productive at the moment when the narrative text in one way or another deviates from its basic schema’, raising the issue of the historical motivations for the deviation (1981: 126). For example, ‘The dialectical moment is upon us when, having first read Stendhal as an embodiment of the romance structure, we then find our-
selves forced into the realization that what is historically specific about Stendhal’s novel is precisely its deviation from that underlying structure which was the starting point of the analysis’ (1981: 129). Hence Jameson forges a relation among the three variables (text, generic deep structure, and history) by ‘completing’ each aspect of genre criticism with a complementary term.

Dual aspects long behind, this dialectical braiding of modal and structural strands of criticism sidelines any text whose modal and structural aspects do not manifest the same genre, and, having competing ideologies and contents, will give no measure of its departure from any purported deep structure that matches them. He is not subject to the same kinds of problems that dog his followers, because he assumes that writer’s and reader’s genre are the same. This apparent solipsism could be an obstacle to his critique in that if it is he who is transcending genre, that genre must be in his head, his vision, from his late vantage, of the genres of the past. But not so: Jameson is confident enough of the truth of his view that he sees the writer as well as critic as engaged in the same project of dialectical critique. As he says of Stendhal, ‘We may now [...] see Le Rouge et le noir [...] as a kind of immanent critique of romance in its restructuration of the form.[...] [T]he complex transformation and foregrounding of the original ‘function’ of the donor amounts to something like a dialectical self-consciousness of romance itself’ (1981: 129). Indeed, ‘the human adventure is one’ (1981: 19).

Jameson might downplay writer-based and reader-based models for Marxist reasons, rejecting the significance of individual judgments next to objective forces of history, or for formal reasons, arguing that the genre cannot be in writer or reader unless it is in the text. But he could not accept the possibility of a single text being assigned two different genres by the two models of genre that he himself uses (‘world’ and ‘work’ in Hernadi’s terms). And yet that is a serious possibility, which seriously undermines the basic vision of generic operation that grounds his dialectical project.

The definition of the novel in terms of its capitalist historical moment underestimates how imaginative techniques relate a genre to other literary categories. The technique of ‘critique’ by ‘realistic displacement’ of romance structure is not necessarily a response to capitalism. It belongs to satire generally from its beginnings, in Lucian, Varro, and Petronius for example.7 Romance is also displaced when it is combined with other modal genres. In Fielding’s Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews, we have something like a comic vision deviation from a romance deep structure. Consider Joseph Andrews as modally, a comic vision of the triumph of a new society around Joseph and Fanny over the old society around Lady
Booby; and structurally, a romance with a hero who undergoes a series of adventures on a quest to return home to the object of his desire, defeating enemies on the way. There is some comic forgiveness and inclusion of the Boobys and their friends in the final chapters where all gather to eat and sleep at the Booby estate, but in romance fashion the couple tend to reject society to escape to an Edenic country life (Lady Booby is consigned to parties in London, and Pamela and Squire Booby are chastised by Parson Adams for laughing during the wedding). A text’s modal aspect may deviate from some discernible romance structure it possesses for various literary reasons. Because they can yield different genre attributions for the same work, there is a good case for distinguishing structural and modal models of genre, and reaffirming a multiple aspect approach.

Final thoughts

I have only considered some of the ways in which cognitive findings about categories can illuminate the workings of literary genres. Insofar as dialectical genre theories unmask and undermine illegitimate claims to truth and power, they are welcome. But it is time to criticize some of their main assumptions and strategies. Jameson’s work might be adapted to fit cognitive findings; it cannot ignore them. I hope and expect that the real ‘post-essentialist theory’, the real ‘post-poststructuralism’ will be cognitive.

Notes


2. ‘Cognitivism’ has come under the scrutiny of semioticians recently. David Danaher sketches out the relations between the kind of cognitive linguistics I take as a framework
here and Peircean semiotic principles, starting from the view that ‘Semiotics encompasses cognition’ (1998: 171), but proposing a rapprochement. Umberto Eco’s recent Kant and the Platypus declares its concerns in its subtitle, ‘Essays on Language and Cognition’, and circles around ‘the characteristics of a cognitive semantics’ (2000: 4). The title honors a debt to Kant’s study of ‘that “devastating” concept (the suggestion came from Peirce) known as the schema’, the problem of which ‘has cropped up again today, right in the middle of the debate on cognitive processes’ (2000: 7). The problem needs historical grounding, according to Eco. His gravitation toward the concept of schema in cognitive semantics indicates a change of orbit, even as he continues to speak to traditional semiotic topics. There are numerous references to ‘cognitivist’ thinkers, including linguists and scientists of perception, mind, and brain. Eco mentions Lakoff’s Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things at a few points — discussing Idealized Cognitive Models (1987: 167), prototypes and the basic level (1987: 196–199), and the Dyirbal classifier system (1987: 199–201). He is somewhat dismissive, finding little to help elaborate his notion of a Cognitive Type. But his book is, as he says, more rambling than systematic. Edelman, on the other hand (1992: 239–49), fits Lakoff’s theory into current neuroscience.

3. I am indebted to Currie’s prototype-based analysis of genre (1997: 42–59). Currie sees ‘central membership in a genre’ in terms of the fulfillment of a conjunction of conditions: ‘To simplify somewhat, a work belongs to a genre only if it possesses the features constitutive of that genre and it is common knowledge between the work’s maker and its audience that the work possesses those features in virtue of its having been influenced by other works which also possess them’ (1997: 52–53).

4. Beebee (1994) presents a dialectical view that criticizes Jameson for seeing literature as ‘outside genre’ rather than emerging from the conflict of genres.

5. Rosmarin’s inattention to detailed studies of schema structures and operations leaves her with only a crude instrument to apply to complex issues. She gets the schema concept from Gombrich’s Art and Illusion but does not note that previous critics have used the same term from the same source: see Hirsch (1967: 104) and Colie (1973: 8ff.).

6. In fact, it is common for individual members of a single genre to select different features from a wider ‘repertoire’ as Alastair Fowler would say, and to use particular features in different ways (1982).

7. See Relihan (1993) for an account of these and other authors as parodists of the conventions of Homeric epic and Socratic philosophy.

8. For an examination of the conflicting generic dimensions of Joseph Andrews, see Cohen (1985). He argues that a work’s relations to other works is more determinative of its genre than its author’s claims or its structure. Watt (1957: chap. 8) undercuts Fielding’s own comments, concluding that the influence of epic on his works was slight, retrograde, and of little importance in later tradition (1957: 270). Baker (1960) responds by reading Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones as ‘Comic Romances’. Fielding was also a dramatist, and Watt and others have discussed the elements of drama in his novels.

References


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