Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge

WAI CHEE DIMOCK

WHAT EXACTLY ARE GENRES? ARE THEY A CLASSIFYING SYSTEM matching the phenomenal world of objects, a sorting principle that separates oranges from apples? Or are they less than that, a taxonomy that never fully taxonomizes, labels that never quite keep things straight? What archives come with genres, what critical lexicons do they offer, and what maps do they yield? And how does the rise of digitization change these archives, lexicons, and maps?

Theorists from Benedetto Croce to Jacques Derrida have long objected to the concept of genre, pointing out that something as dynamic as literature can never be anatomized ahead of time, segregated by permanent groupings. "[I]nstead of asking before a work of art if it be expressive and what it expresses," genre criticism only wants to label it, putting it into a pigeonhole, asking only "if it obey the *laws* of epic or of tragedy." Nothing can be more misguided, Croce says, for these "laws of the kinds" have never in fact been observed by practicing writers (36–37). Derrida makes the same point: "As soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity." Such border policing is an exercise in futility, he says, for the law of genre is an impossible law; it contains within itself a "principle of contamination," so much so that the law is honored only in its breach (224–25).

The history of genre has never been without its lapses, a fact worth keeping in mind—as a cautionary warning and as a heuristic spur. Michael Wood has written on the "unfinishable" work as a genre, salient as a special case. But unfinishability might also be said to be a systemic failing in all genres—a productive failing—in the sense that none is a closed book, none an exhaustive blueprint

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able to predict and contain all future developments. Far from being a neat catalog of what exists and what is to come, genres are a vexed attempt to deal with material that might or might not fit into that catalog. They are empirical rather than logical (Cohen) and as such likely to be confronted with specimens they are not able to foresee. Even ancient genres such as tragedy and epic (which Aristotle discusses in the *Poetics*) get messed up as more and more unrecognizable objects lay claim to those titles.[1] The membership—of any genre—is an open rather than closed set, because there is always another instance, another empirical bit of evidence, to be added. These instances make for a peculiar morphology: literature has not solidified and (as far as we know) will never solidify into a congealed shape. Its force of incipience pulls and strains against all taxonomic regimes. The spilling over of phenomena from labels stands here as an ever-present likelihood, a challenge to any systemizing claim.

What would literary studies look like if it were organized by genres in this unfinished sense, with spillovers at front and center? What dividing lines could still be maintained? And what kinds of knowledge would be generated as a result, answering to what conception of the humanities?

Database is the name that Ed Folsom proposes for a genre that spills over by design, one brought on by the digital revolution; it restructures humanistic knowledge from the ground up, by liquefying the medium of storage, transmission, and retrieval. Unlike printed texts, coming to us prepackaged and deceptively contained within book covers, a database does away with the illusion of containment altogether. User interface is key here (as Jerome McGann points out in his response to Folsom), for a database is meant not only for storage but also for access, a flood of information that overflows any set frame of inquiry. An endless stream of researchers can come to it, armed with different queries, different protocols and objectives, and resolve the material into as many working patterns. Digitization is, in that sense, both a "performative" and an "animative," as Diana Taylor defines these terms. Multiple use is its lifeblood. A fluid continuum is the result. The links and pathways that open up suggest that knowledge is generative rather than singular, with many outlets, ripples, and cascades, randomized by cross-references rather than locked into any one-to-one correspondence. The World Wide Web is not only its medium but also its template. The input network here is vast, washing up a largely unregulated mass of material, blurring the line between intention and accident, and changing the very criterion for what counts as a text (Drucker). No longer integrated by print, the fluid sequences flitting across the computer screen "are not containers of meaning or data but sets of rules (algorithms) for generating themselves" (McGann 138). They combine, divide, and recombine, a momentary bundling that can be endlessly unbundled and rebundled.

The Walt Whitman Archive is a case in point. An electronic database featuring all six editions of *Leaves of Grass*, and with thousands of manuscripts and notebooks to be added, it dissolves a seemingly integral object into a dizzying number of variants, laying to rest any hope of an authoritative text or any monopolizing of interpretive authority. *Leaves of Grass* in the twenty-first century is a visual as well as textual field, receiving between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand hits a day, many of them coming (as expected) from North and South America and Europe but also a surprisingly large number coming from Asia. What kind of "text" is this, with a morphology born of global access, and what genre does it belong to? For these online readers, the poetry is inseparable from the electronic medium that disseminates it. It is liquefied by that medium, taking more courses than one, a user-generated forking structure that Espen Aarseth calls "cybertext," raising "the stakes

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of interpretation to those of intervention" (4). This cybertext has much in common with its paper ancestor, but it has mutated significantly, its protocol governed by the electronic medium rather than by print culture. *Leaves of Grass*, mutating in this way, is as much a product of the twenty-first century as of the nineteenth. *The Walt Whitman Archive* is not just chronicling literary history of the past; it is making literary history at this very moment—a history of variants, each speaking to its particular locale, a continuum of "exaptation" that might well resemble the evolution and adaptation of biological species (Gould and Vrba, qtd. in Moretti 274).

What then defines membership in a genre? One thing is clear: it is "not a form of textual predicate, indexically pointing towards a primary text" (Apter 212) but a runaway reproductive process: offbeat, offcenter, and wildly exogenous. In Japan, Taiwan, Korea, China, whether *Leaves of Grass* is epic or lyric is largely immaterial. After all, as Stephen Owen reminds us, these generic categories are alien to China and Japan, neither of which has an indigenous tradition that can be called epic. If *Leaves of Grass* belongs to any genre at all, it is to something much looser, something like "world literature." But even this is an ontologized name for a process that is by and large without an ontology, since world literature is not a thing, not congenitally given but circumstantially derived. It is an outcome, a happenstance that "only has an effective life wherever, and whenever, it is actually present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (Damrosch 4). World literature is virtual, which is to say, less a class of substantive objects than a conjunctural effect, the result of an accidental match between the coordinates of literary history and the distribution of human populations across the globe.

And if world literature is virtual, so too is every other genre. For virtuality might turn out to be a fairly ordinary condition, not new, but a probabilistic register never absent from the world. It is the sum of the not yet realized, with no actualized shape, a kind of general solvent out of which particular entities can acquire particular features. This is what genres are. As open sets endlessly dissolved by their openness, they too are virtual in this nontechnical sense, resembling the database in being an unscripted effect of their membership and in being only a fraction of what they could be at any given moment. Genres have solid names, ontologized names. What these names designate, though, is not taxonomic classes of equal solidity but fields at once emerging and ephemeral, defined over and over again by new entries that are still being produced. They function as a "horizon of expectations" to some extent (Jauss 79), but that horizon becomes real only when there happen to be texts that exemplify it. Far from being clear-cut slices of the literary pie, genres have only an on-demand spatial occupancy. They can be brought forth or sent back as the user chooses, switched on or off, scaled up or down. Each is one among several levels of resolution, with alternating features that can be read either as random detail or as salient pattern (Hayles).

Stackability, switchability, and scalability are the key attributes of genres when they are seen as virtual. These terms, inspired by the spatial fluidity of the digital medium, bring to mind a comparable fluidity in genres. The nonrigid properties that Douglas Hofstadter analyzes in the computer's operating platforms apply equally well to genres, for they too can be layered on one another, flipped back and forth, maximized or minimized, with chance associations "forming and then falling apart every microsecond," out of which "the familiar and utterly stable-seeming properties of wateriness emerge" (Hofstadter and the Fluid Analogies Research Group 2–3). Epic and lyric, familiar and stable-seeming, are not hidebound for that reason. It is more helpful, in fact, to think of them as swimming in a pool, a kind of generic wateriness. This

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medium not only allows for capillary action of various sorts, it also suggests that the concept of genre has meaning only in the plural, only when that pool is seen as occupied by more than one swimmer. After all, it would make no sense to refer to anything as a lyric if lyrics were all we had, if there were not other genres whose shadows gave definition to the one that happened to be in the foreground. This recursive landscape (Hofstadter 127–57) suggests that genre is best seen not flatly, as the enactment of one set of legislative norms, but as an alternation between dimensions, mediated by vectors of up and down, front and back, in and out. To study a single genre by itself is to obscure these vectors and the complex motions they permit. This is what Anne Freadman has in mind when she urges on us an "intergeneric" model, a "quotation of generic forms outside their stable jurisdictional frames" (44, 46). Centered on "uptake," this model focuses on ways that generic particles can filter through, well up and fall back, circulate and commingle.

The parallel with digital media is once again striking. Commenting on the distilling, extracting, and relaunching of old media in the new—a phenomenon they call "remediation"—Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write:

> Digital visual media can best be understood as the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. (15)

As with media, so too with genres. None does its work in isolation, and none without a continuous stream of input from other genres. Receiving and compounding are crucial to both, as are osmosis and sedimentation. "[P]oetry itself . . . / Is a single splendid quotation," Anna Akhmatova has written.[2] In its suppleness of receiving, poetry is probably a special case, but some degree of the quotational would seem to knit together all genres, not only verbal but also visual, as Mieke Bal has shown.[3] Extending the concept of remediation, then, we might want to coin a somewhat awkward term, a gerund, *regenreing*, to highlight the activity here as cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory. The field is profoundly unoriginal in this cumulative sense, the sense that Peter Stallybrass urges us to embrace: it is impossible to say who is first, impossible to keep "a strict accountancy of mine and thine." For too long, originality has been held up as the touchstone of creative authorship, Stallybrass points out. Surely it should not be the only touchstone. Genres can do much to guide us in the opposite direction, for, not fixated on originality, they give pride of place instead to the art of receiving, and affirm it as art: crafty, experimental, even risk-taking.[4] Through their admixed newness and oldness, they carry on the expressive forms that human beings collectively inherit. The history of genres, like the history of media, is above all a reproductive history, which suggests that it is a kinship network as well, exogenous to be sure, updated to be sure, but resting always on some kind of fluid continuum, with tributaries flowing into every individual instance.

This fluid continuum extends back to the earliest recorded life. Classicists have been struck by it, aligning poetry not with the isolated genius of one particular person but with a pooled effort, its origins lost, its progeny too many to count. The name *Homer* is really shorthand for a formulaic style, developed out of the prosodic needs of the dactylic hexameter, Milman Parry makes clear. Unoriginality is its strength, for "the character of this language reveals that it is a work beyond the powers of a single man, or even a single generation of poets; consequently we know that we are in the presence of a stylistic element which is the product of a tradition and which every bard of Homer's time must have used" (6). Epic po-

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etry, in its commingled authorship, is indeed an alluvial process. It is a World Wide Web *avant la lettre*, the nonproprietary work of many. It invites us to rethink the morphology of texts, in a way that dovetails strangely with the challenge of the new media. "The conceptual development of the page in computer media," Lev Manovich writes, can be seen "not as a further development of the codex form, but as a return to earlier forms such as the papyrus roll of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Scrolling through the contents of a computer or a World Wide Web page has more in common with unrolling than it does with turning the pages of a modern book" (75). Manovich is referring specifically to the indexical motions of reading an electronic text. Extending his insight, however, we might also want to experiment more generally with the key term of digitization—fluidity—putting it front and center in our study of genres. What does it mean to think of them as afloat in the same pool, with generic particles released by cross-currents, filtering into one another and coalescing in different ways? What research projects stem from such a model? What curricula do they suggest? And can traditional genres be assimilated into this wateriness, without distortion, without loss of detail?

The work of Gregory Nagy is exemplary here. Writing well before the advent of digital humanities, he has nonetheless written a history of genres as a history of cross-currents, of diffusion, interface, and embedding. In *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*, Nagy overturns a number of critical commonplaces about epic and lyric by suspending each in a fluid continuum, recasting the relation between them as one of "possession." He uses the word advisedly. Epic is possessed by lyric, dissolved by it and nested in it, not only because epic is spatially enclosed but also because it is temporally antedated; lyric has the advantage of depth as well as width. As his book proceeds, Nagy says, "the definition of *lyric* will progressively broaden, to the point that lyric becomes, for all practical purposes, the basis for defining *epic*, rather than the other way around" (3). Even though epic is usually assumed to be older and bulkier, he argues that the opposite case can be made. It can be made, that is, on the level of genre, focusing not on the dates of individual poems but on the generic histories of epic and lyric, seen here as linked, as the twin outcomes of a cumulative process. That process, at its longest, is more lyric than epic. "This is not to say that lyric is necessarily older than epic or that epic did not influence lyric as well as the other way around," Nagy concedes. "Rather the point is simply that Greek lyric represents a tradition—or various traditions—in its own right, and that the form of Greek epic can be explained as a differentiation of various forms that we find in Greek lyric" (3).

If the specific argument is startling, no less so is the method. Nagy seems to take it for granted that epic and lyric are a single analytic unit, inseparable from each other. Literary history is predicated on the continuum that encompasses both. And nowhere is that continuum more in evidence than in the technical apparatus of poetry, of which meter is the clearest indication. According to Nagy, epic and lyric share the same metrical forms and must be taken to be of common descent, though lyric, the presumptive junior partner, has the longer genealogy:

> The two major categories of meters that comprise the song-making traditions of Pindar, the so-called Aeolic and dactylo-epitrite, are shown to contain the building blocks of the iambic trimeter, the elegiac distich, and even the hexameter. In this sense it can even be said that Pindar's inherited meters are the parents of Homer's hexameter, though the parent in this case has experienced a longer evolution, culminating with Pindar, than the child, culminating with Homer. (11)

Literary history is a history of kinship. But this kinship is not always self-evident,

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written neither in broad strokes nor in the all-too-obvious dates of individual poems. If we go by dates, Homer's epic seems to precede Pindar's lyric by several hundred years. Rejecting automatic dating, Nagy suggests that literary history is more complicated than that, that our analytic method requires a simultaneous "broadening and narrowing" (17–51). Scale enlargement is necessary on the one hand, since epic and lyric require a time frame going back hundreds of years. But scale enlargement must go hand in hand with a scale diminishment, since only minute scrutiny can bring out the long history of prosody packed into the fine points of phrase and rhythm. This combination of a long time frame and a short observational distance makes the study of genres different from traditional close reading, breaking down the supposed opposition between the large and the small, between macro history and micro variation. Within a fluid continuum, these two are not opposed but complementary. If the macro scale depends on extended kinship, that kinship is demonstrable only if the micro evidence is sufficiently detailed and precise. On the strength of such small detail we can begin to gauge not only the temporal careers of genres but also their geographic provenance, a kinship network as surprising in its width as in its length.

What allows Pindar to parent Homer is Pindar's "inherited meters": these give lyric a "long evolution," longer than that of epic. Where then were these meters inherited from, how far back did they go, and what were the coordinates of this reproductive network? *Pindar's Homer* is not an isolated argument in this regard but a sequel to Nagy's earlier work *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (1974), in which he not only gestures toward the lyric parenting of epic but also finds another parent, an older one, in a genealogy stretching across Asia:

> Just as the Greek language is cognate with the Sanskrit language, so also the meters of Greek Lyric are cognate with the meters of Sanskrit Vedic. . . . My point of departure is the phraseological correspondence, already noticed by Kuhn in 1853, between Sapphic/Homeric κλέος ἄφθιτον and Rig-Vedic *śráva(s) akṣitam*. Both the Greek and the Indic expression are conventionally interpreted as "imperishable fame," and both can be reconstructed to an identical prototype, **klewos ŋdhgʷhitom*. I propose to show that the metrical contexts of these cognate phrases are also cognate. My purpose is to correlate Meillet's theory of Indo-European meter with the reconstruction of an Indo-European poetic expression. (1)

Nagy is at pains to show that his own scholarship is not original either: it extends and corroborates the work of Adalbert Kuhn and Antoine Meillet. These two, along with Ulrich von Wilamowitz, have argued for some time that Ancient Greek prosody has its place not at the head of an isolated Western tradition but as part of an Indo-European metrical continuum, one of the oldest kinship networks known to human beings. In this continuum, the Indic parents and cradles the Greek.

Dipesh Chakrabarty does not cite this body of work in his *Provincializing Europe*, but surely this scholarship does just that. More recently, the emphasis on the continuum of kinship has given rise to two other arguments about the inseparableness of Asia, Africa, and Europe, even more ambitious and thoroughgoing. Martin Bernal, in *Black Athena*, urges us to think of the Mediterranean as an Egyptian sea, a reproductive network extending from south to north, from Memphis to Athens. Walter Burkert, in *The Orientalizing Revolution* and *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis*, draws a larger circle still, making Greece kin to a civilization even more ancient, dating back to 2100 BCE and centered in Mesopotamia, with Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Aramaic, as well as Phoenician and Egyptian, offshoots. In these paradigms, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have many parents, non-European parents. And while a fierce de-

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bate has sprung up, especially around Bernal's *Black Athena*,[5] classicists and archaeologists now generally agree that the map for antiquity comprised at least three continents. To the extent that the birth of genres coincided with the birth of these ancient civilizations, it too must be studied as a "world system," a diffusional process more or less coextensive with the history and geography of human beings on the planet (Dimock; Spivak). There is no reason to make a closed set out of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Divine Comedy*, when there are vibrant epic traditions in the Near East, South Asia, Africa, eastern Europe, and the Americas.[6]

If genres are vehicles that "actively generate and shape knowledge of the world" (Frow 2), what would students learn if literature were taught under this rubric? Not segregated by periods or by nations, the fields of knowledge would feature long backgrounds as well as minute evidence, with texts both ancient and modern and groupings both large and small, understood to be prenational in their evolutionary past and transnational in their geographic spread. Hegel sets an example. Unabashedly Eurocentric, firmly convinced that the "epic proper [is] actualized in the most artistically adequate way by the Greeks" (1093), he is careful all the same to include, in his *Aesthetics*, more than passing references to non-European examples: Sanskrit epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, pre-Islamic Arabic epics such as the *Mu'allaqat* and *Hamasa*, and Persian epics such as the *Shahnama* (1094–98).

For Hegel, there is no looking away from all this evidence. The epic (or any other genre) is not limited to one language, one nation, or even one continent, for it "ramifies into numerous species and collateral species and occurs extensively in many epochs and amongst many peoples" (1093). While he is content to stop with these species and collateral species at their initial appearance, we might want to ask, taking advantage of his world map, what pedagogic benefits there might be in tracing this speciation to the present moment. If Europe, Asia, and Africa were kin in antiquity, what are their cross-currents in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? What kinds of knowledge would be generated by this fluid dynamics, overflowing containers both national and chronological?

The *Ramayana* is a case in point. Dating back to 300 BCE, this Sanskrit epic with its incorrigible monkey, Hanuman, went east in the sixteenth century. Absorbed into a different genre in China, it also turned into prose, finding a new home in the folk novel *Hsi-yu chi* ("Journey to the West"), where Hanuman morphed into Sun Wu-Kung, a monkey as mischievous and magical (Wu). In that guise, it added another leg to its eastern circuit, winding up in the New World, where Sun Wu-Kung renewed his part-simian and part-human career in the works of three novelists, Native American and Asian American: Gerald Vizenor's *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1987), Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), and Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (1997).[7] On his own, Hanuman also makes his way into Octavio Paz's *El mono gramático* (1974),[8] while Sita, wife of Rama, fuels a heated debate in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* (1993). The Indo-European continuum is not just metrical but also novelistic at this point, and planetary in its reach, with the Americas as energetic entries. Meanwhile in India, the popularity of the *Ramayana* continues unabated, though the Sanskrit original has of course given way to a host of regional variants: the Bengali *Ramayana*, the Telugu *Ramayana*, the Kerala *Ramayana*, and so on (Richman, *Many* Ramayanas and *Questioning*). In the Awadhi- and Bhojpuri-speaking areas of northern India, the story of Sita is incorporated into women's work songs (Nilsson). In the Malabor region of southern India, on the other hand, the *teyyattam* rituals of the local communities seem to be based on

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a critique of the Sanskrit poem (Freeman). In the Tamil-speaking Nadu, Muslim interpreters use the *Ramayana* as a literary model to write a Tamil biography of the prophet Muhammad (Narayanan).

Switching genres is one of the most eloquent signs of political agency: the *Ramayana* now is a host of variants afloat in the generic pool. These effluences are just as striking outside India. As the Sanskrit epic spread to Japan, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Java, and Indonesia, it flourished as street theater, song-and-dance cycles, shadow-puppet shows, a pan-Asian vernacular tradition carried on for two thousand years and serving every conceivable political end (Iyengar; Raghavan; Blackburn). With immigration to Europe, these vernacular subgenres became European subgenres. On 19 October 1979, when a group of South Asian and African Caribbean women staged a protest in Southall, a multiethnic district of London, they ended by burning an effigy of Ravana, the demon from the *Ramayana*. He "wore a huge mask, on which each of his ten heads had been drawn to represent an aspect of the racism that non-white groups in Britain encountered, including faces of Enoch Powell, Maggie Thatcher, and other political candidates, the insignia of the riot police, and an image standing for restrictive immigration laws" (Richman, "Ramlila" 309).

There is no better example of a genre that spills over. Its scope is intercontinental, its long evolution stretching from the third century BCE to the present moment. To take the epic seriously is to take seriously the human species as a longtime dweller on the planet, a home indivisible in its circumference. That circumference allows us to see not so much the permanence of the epic as the genre's endless capacity for locomotion and capillary action. Saturated and resaturated by human needs, the epic is what we collectively make of it: it can be poetry, fiction, or street performance, just as its habitats are both east and west, high and low, ancient and modern. Georg Lukács has warned us not to make versification the yardstick for generic distinctions (56); it seems unwise to base those distinctions on any other absolute yardstick. For if the continuum of genres has anything to tell us, it is that these seeming oppositions are often flippable, true only of a particular resolution; they come with reversible vectors and can dissolve at a moment's notice. If only to keep up with such vectors, literary studies needs to be more fluid in its taxonomies, putting less emphasis on the division of knowledge and more on its kinships, past, present, and future.

What would a fluid curriculum look like? The long evolution of the *Ramayana* points to a cross-time archive and a map of several continents, one of the consequences of using genre as an organizing rubric. These consequences are not yet tested, since genre as such is not yet a recognized pedagogical field. Its unrecognizability is in part its strength, pointing to some nontrivial dimensions of literature not brought into relief by our existing taxonomies. The nonstandard shape here is empirical, not preassigned; it comes not from automatic periodization or nationalization but from simply observing the meandering paths of this body of material. Literary studies is not usually thought of as an empirical discipline, yet empiricism of this sort, based on evidence not necessarily predicted though hard to deny, can do much to free us from an overreliance on default boundaries. If the study of genre ends up being not even strictly language-based (see Harpham in this issue), if it takes us to popular forms as well as to adjacent disciplines such as anthropology, folklore, and performance studies, then literature itself might be part of a larger phenomenal field, feeding into it and being fed by it, a kinship network still more various and robust.

The *Ramayana* is not the only epic dissolved by its host of variants, switching back and forth from ancient to modern, from arcane to popular, from a bulky epic to fragments small but highly charged. *Gilgamesh*,

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a Sumerian and Akkadian epic dating back to 2100 BCE, was freshly translated by David Ferry (1992), Danny Johnson (1992), Andrew George (1999), Benjamin Foster (2001), and Stephen Mitchell (2004) and turned into a verse play by Yusef Komunyakaa and Chad Gracia (2006). Scaled down and set adrift as a floating particle, it can also filter through and lodge itself in another genre, sticking out as a cyst or bump, irritant or stimulant. A two-page condensation of *Gilgamesh* the epic, for instance, is suspended as kind of a lyric precipitate in *Gilgamesh* the novel, by the Australian author Joan London (174–75). Also in that particle form, the ancient epic plays a crucial role in the Darmok episode of *Star Trek*.[9] The *Odyssey*, needless to say, has been floating loose and relaunched over and over, most notably in the hands of Derek Walcott. Its currency as an English word, however, seems largely due to the currency of popular genres, odysseys of various sorts. Nelson Demille (best-selling author of thrillers, one of which happens to be called *The Talbot Odyssey*) is probably speaking for many practitioners of the genre when he claims more than a passing acquaintance with the Greek poet. In *The General's Daughter*, Demille's narrator notices "a reproduction of Rembrandt's 'Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer.' I sipped my beer and contemplated Aristotle contemplating Homer's bust" (8). This kind of contemplation seems to be Dante's fate as well, funneling his epic into many distant (though often traceable) offshoots. The *Divine Comedy*—or at least the *Inferno*—is now the stuff novels are made of, a conspicuous crust and elevated backbone in Matthew Pearl's crime novel *The Dante Club* and in the eponymous science fiction novel of Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle.[10]

Even the *Aeneid*, the least promising of the lot, has been contemplated more than we might think. Filtering into Latin fairy tales and read in school in the Middle Ages (Ziolkowski 68), it has since then been deposited across an equally surprising map, also featuring a mix of the high and the low, with school learning feeding into popular expressions. Nobody exemplifies these percolating movements better than Bob Dylan.[11] As Richard Thomas shows, Dylan knows Latin: at the Hibbing High School, he had a two-year stint in the Latin Club. That memory seems to have drifted into his early lyrics. In "When I Paint My Masterpiece," Dylan sings, "Oh, the streets of Rome are filled with rubble / Ancient footprints are everywhere." Yet, as Thomas also points out, Dylan's proficiency was limited, and these ancient footprints are actually left not by the *Aeneid* in Latin but by one of its English variants, the translation by Allen Mandelbaum. In *Aeneid* 6, Vergil wrote and Mandelbaum translated:

> [B]ut yours will be the rulership of nations
> remember Roman, these will be your arts
> To teach the ways of peace to those you conquer
> to spare defeated peoples, tame the proud.
> (851–53)

In "Lonesome Day Blues," Dylan's lyrics switch that exhorting, epic *you* into a self-important, self-deluded *I*:

> I'm gonna spare the defeated—I'm gonna speak to the crowd
> I'm gonna spare the defeated, boys, I'm going to speak to the crowd
> I'm goin' to teach peace to the conquered
> I'm gonna tame the proud.

In *Aeneid* 6, Aeneas visits the underworld and is advised by his father, Anchises, about conduct in war. The futility of that advice—both in the course of the *Aeneid* and in the course of United States history—has weighed on generations of translators, from Mandelbaum to Stanley Lombardo to Robert Fagles. It also weighs on Dylan. In his retelling, there is no Anchises speaking words of wisdom; there is only the "well schooled" captain of the unit, whose hollow words deceive no one: "Well my

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captain, he's decorated—he's well schooled and he's skilled / He's not sentimental—don't bother him at all / How many of his pals have been killed."

The lyricization of epic switches more than just the pronouns.[12] That shift in the pronominal pattern also rescales the epic, cutting Anchises's words down to size and turning a teleology into a psychology, a pompous, pathetic one. Saturated by its new environment, this particle of the *Aeneid* is a mutant indeed—another example of the lyric possession of an epic past. Yet, though possessed, these lines by Vergil are not flatly contained either. Ironized as they are, they still point to an alternative landscape, an alternative genre, in which those words still had sinew and rigor, in which irony was not a settled question, though they are not able now to reconstitute that world. We are no longer in Hesiod's age of gold, silver, or even bronze, Dylan says in his July 2001 interview with the Italian newspaper *La repubblica*, but we are not completely cut off from it either: "This is the Iron Age, you know we're living in the Iron Age. What was the last age, the Age of Bronze or something? You know we can still feel that age. We can still feel that age" (qtd. in Thomas 39).

This is not a bad way to think about rock music, and it is not a bad way to think about the novel. J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, also invoking Hesiod, seems eerily to underscore the kinship between these two genres. Set in a South Africa ruled by apartheid, this novel too cannot bear witness to any age other than that announced in its title. Like Dylan's rock lyrics, it also features the first-person pronoun, belonging in this case to Mrs. Curren, a teacher of classics dying of cancer and being cared for by a homeless man named Vercueil. The subject of Latin comes up, and Vercueil asks to hear some specimen of this "dead language," "a language spoken by the dead":

> I recited some Virgil, Virgil on the unquiet dead:
>
> nec ripas datur horrendas et rauca fluenta
> transportare prius quam sedibus ossa
> quierunt.
> centum errant annos volitantque haec
> litora circum;
> tum demum admissi stagna exoptata
> revisunt. (191, 192)

Like Dylan, Coetzee's Mrs. Curren quotes from *Aeneid* 6, a book about the dead whose words are still afloat, lifted out of context, and subject to the capillary action of generic switches. If the lyricization of epic redefines the bounds of rock music for Dylan, a parallel lyricization, for Coetzee, seems to redefine the bounds of the novel.[13] This kinship network, muddying temporal, spatial, and generic lines, invites us to rethink our division of knowledge. There is much rethinking to do.

Notes

1. I depart here from Mikhail Bakhtin, who sees the epic as finished in both senses of the word: it has achieved its formal completion and is being replaced now by the novel.

2. The lines "Но, может быть, поэзия сама – / Одна великолепная цитата" are from Akhmatova's poem "Не повторяй – душа твоя богата."

3. George Deem's *Italian Vermeer (Caravaggio)*, a detail of which appears on the cover of this special issue, is reproduced in Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio*. I thank Patricia Yaeger for coming up with this vivid illustration.

4. In this context, Heather Dubrow has written, "[T]he respect for originality sometimes expressed by modern readers should bemuse and confuse many writers both in earlier centuries and in our own. . . . [A]fter all, most of the tales recounted by Chaucer's pilgrims are versions of well-known stories, and Shakespeare, like other Renaissance playwrights, bases most of his plays on plots so familiar that Ben Jonson could label one of them 'a mouldy tale.' Writers of all ages have borrowed the topoi of genres quite as frequently and quite as openly as they have borrowed plots" (9).

5. See, for instance, Lefkowitz; Lefkowitz and Rogers. For a concise critique of Bernal, see Pounder. Bernal responds to his critics in *Black Athena Writes Back*.

6. See, for instance, the essays collected in Appadurai, Korom, and Mills; Beissinger, Tylus, and Wofford. See also Okpewho.

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7. Apart from these New World continuations, Sun Wu-Kung also makes his way to Britain, to Timothy Mo's *The Monkey King*.

8. I thank Doris Sommer for guiding me to Paz's text.

9. I thank Claudia Stokes for bringing this episode to my attention.

10. I thank Scott Huggins for alerting me to Niven and Pournelle's *Inferno*.

11. I follow Ricks in taking Dylan as a serious lyric poet.

12. For an illuminating discussion of pronominal patterns in lyric, see Johnson 1–23. For an argument on lyric as public poetry, see Blasing 4–5.

13. Todorov's concept of the "poetic novel" is especially pertinent here. Among its operations, Todorov points to "embeddings" as one of the most important (56).

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